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## Respecting People as Things

*Environment*

Now, I say, man and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will.  
Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Knowledge, I believe, is fundamental to ethical reasoning, and it must therefore be considered a duty in our morally complex technological world. While I will explore this claim in detail in chapter 4, it is useful to introduce the argument here: if we are to regard knowledge in this new light, we must first understand how knowledge can render an entity moral. To recall our example from the Preface, moral attitudes toward women have greatly evolved over the centuries in Western society, and as our societies have gained greater knowledge, we have ascribed new kinds of value to women. As a result, the cultural default setting is generally that women have an “intrinsic” worth equal to men’s.

If acts of cognition can influence moral value, I contend that we can improve the lot of many, many people by altering the way we think about them, and one way to do so is to treat them as things. This notion, of course, flies in the face of Kant’s maxim that people should not be regarded as a means to an end – that is, that they should not be seen as “things.” As we will see later, however, some things are treated with greater dignity than many people; I argue, consequently, that humankind will benefit if we can ascribe to people many of the values we now associate with such highly regarded nonhuman entities, and to that end, I suggest a new maxim – that of “respecting people as things.” In this new ethical orientation, things with great intrinsic value become what I call *moral mediators*: as we interrogate how and why we value such things, we can begin to see how and why people can (and should) be similarly respected. In this way, these things mediate moral ideas, and in so doing they can grant us precious, otherwise unreachable ethical information that will render many of our attitudes toward other human beings obsolete.

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As is commonly known, Kant's categorical imperative states, "*Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*"<sup>1</sup> When dealing with "[t]he formula of the end in itself,"<sup>2</sup> Kant observes that

man, and in general every rational being *exists* as an end in himself and not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will: he must in all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be viewed *at the same time as an end*. ... Beings whose existence depends, not on our will, but on nature, have none the less, if they are not rational beings, only a relative value as means and are consequently called *things*. Rational beings, on the other hand, are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves – that is, as something which ought not to be used merely as a means – and consequently imposes to that extent a limit on all arbitrary treatment of them (and is an object of reverence). ... Persons, therefore, are not merely subjective ends whose existence as an object of our actions has a value *for us*; they are *objective ends*, that is, things whose existence is in itself an end, and indeed an end such that in its place we can put no other end to which they should serve *simply* as means.<sup>3</sup>

Kant uses the word "end" in a very formal way, as synonymous with "dignity"; its teleological nature is, after all, not important. Kant is very clear on this point when he writes that "[t]eleology views nature as a kingdom of ends; ethics views a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature. In the first case the kingdom of ends is a theoretical Idea used to explain what exists. In the second case it is a practical Idea used to bring into existence what does not exist but can be made actual by our conduct – and indeed to bring it into existence in conformity with this Idea."<sup>4</sup> Hence, Kant defines the "kingdom" as a "systematic union of different rational beings under common laws."<sup>5</sup>

These considerations lead us to the following practical imperative: "*Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.*"<sup>6</sup> In the "kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. If it has a price, something else can be put in its place as an equivalent; if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has a

<sup>1</sup> Kant, 1964, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 95–98.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 95–96.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 96. For Kant, intentions are central to morality. The will is the central object of moral appraisal. Maxims of actions articulate the agent's intentions.

dignity.”<sup>7</sup> Things that human beings need have a “market price”; moreover, items that are merely desired rather than needed have an affective “fancy price” [*Affektionspreis*]. But “that which constitutes the sole condition under which anything can be an end in itself has not merely a relative value – that is, a price – but has an intrinsic value – that is, *dignity*.”<sup>8</sup>

A simple example involving human moral behavior and responsibility can illuminate the Kantian perspective. Economists say that a decision results in a negative externality when someone other than the decision maker ends up bearing some of the decision’s cost. Responsibility is externalized when people avoid taking responsibility for the problems they cause and delegate finding a solution to someone who had no part in creating the trouble. When those who must bear the consequences of a decision are not aware that such a task has been delegated to them, they are treated as means. On the other hand, of course, responsibility is internalized when people accept responsibility for the outcome of their actions.

Kant’s wonderful lesson can be inverted: it is possible for things to be treated or respected in ways that one usually reserves for human beings. Many things, or means, previously devoid of value or valuable only in terms of their market price can also acquire moral status or intrinsic value. Conversely, just as things can be assigned new kinds of value, so too can human beings, for there are positive aspects of treating people as things, as we shall see.<sup>9</sup>

### A Profound Struggle

Anthropocentric ideas, like those that inform Kant’s imperative, have made it difficult for people to acquire moral values usually associated with things and for things to attain the kind of moral worth traditionally reserved for people. As we have said, people should not be treated as if they were a means to an end, but I argue that in some cases we should do just that. My idea for a new maxim – one retooled for the twenty-first century – is, as I have said, to respect people as things in a positive sense. In this scenario, people are respected as “means” in a way that creates a virtuous circle, one in which positive moral aspects enjoyed by things can be used to reshape moral endowments attributed to people, as in the examples I will give in the following chapters.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> To further clarify my concern about the moral relationships between “people” and “things,” the distinction between moral patients and moral agents will be considered in chapter 6 (in the section “Templates of Moral Doing”).

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Assigning the values of things to human beings seems a bit unnatural, but I believe we can become more comfortable with the concept by analyzing the more familiar practice of ascribing value in the opposite direction – that is, the practice of granting things the value we generally associate with human beings. Attributing moral worth to nonhuman things can be seen as a combination of the Kantian imperative and John Stuart Mill's idea of freedom: "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it."<sup>10</sup> If, as Mill teaches, beings (or things, we now add) have a right to something, they are entitled not only to the goal itself but also to the unobstructed pursuit of it. When things also became regarded as entities with interests and rights of their own, the philosophical conceptual space of utilitarianism (animals suffer!) and the idea of environmental ecology were constructed. How did this happen?

One particular type of thing has long been used as a sort of corollary to human beings – animals, whose human-like properties and functions, for example, make possible their use in biomedical research. In this field, studies using *animal models* have induced certain conditions in nonhuman creatures that have allowed scientists to draw conclusions about some human conditions. Researchers achieve such results by exploiting analogies (the fact that rats and humans are alike in various ways, for instance) rather than disanalogies. This theme is very important in philosophy of science because modeling is a widespread scientific practice. Many epistemological problems arise, however, like the challenge of identifying the qualities that make an animal model valid and appropriate.<sup>11</sup> In ethics, however, I contend that the challenge is to look at animals and things not only as scientific models but also as moral models; doing so will help us in our quest to respect people as "means" and to create a virtuous circle that enriches the moral endowments attributed to humans.<sup>12</sup>

#### ECOLOGY: "THINGS" IN SEARCH OF VALUES

##### Women, Animals, and Plants

I have said that an entity's value can be recalibrated by knowledge, but how does this process occur? Let us return to the fact that women's intrinsic worth has shifted over the centuries; women are, perhaps, among the most significant "things" to gain new moral rights in Western culture, a change that was not universally welcomed. Indeed, the ideas in this direction

<sup>10</sup> Mill, 1966, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Shelley, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Magnani, 2007b.

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propagated by Mary Wollstonecraft in her 1792 treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* were initially considered absurd.<sup>13</sup> In the last few decades, similar derision has been leveled against animal rights advocates and environmental ethicists, groups that have faced struggles reminiscent of eighteenth-century women's. Just as Wollstonecraft attempted to cast women as beings with great intrinsic value, some intellectuals and activists have sought to reframe how various plants, animals, and ecosystems – even the land itself – are valued so that they are regarded as “ends” and accorded the rights and protection that such status entails.

This way of thinking, of course, could lead to many consequences: if animals are high-status ends rather than means, for example, most experiments on animals would have to be considered wrong. But how should we decide which, if any, organisms are morally suitable subjects for medical research? If it is only a capacity like reason or speech that distinguishes between beings who deserve moral consideration and those who do not, animals would be acceptable subjects, but then so too would infants, the mentally impaired, and the abjectly senile. In this case, classical utilitarianism is the simplest approach to the problem of conducting research: sentience, defined as the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, as a prerequisite for having interests, could be a good alternative criterion. Under this construct, however, many animals could easily acquire moral status: pigs, veal calves, and chicken would therefore have the right to more space in their cages, and experimenting on animals and eating their flesh could be seen as dogmatic speciesism. Moreover, what about plants, soil, water, and air? Are long-lived conscious beings (“Kantian” beings, I would say) intrinsically more valuable than ephemeral or insentient beings? Not necessarily. All living beings have value, but how is that value allocated? From what is it derived?

Various kinds of knowledge and reasoning play roles in assigning new values to animals: (1) anthropocentric arguments, which hold that mistreating animals is related to the possible mistreatment of human beings (a point also stressed by John Locke); (2) utilitarian considerations about sentience and the derived equality of humans and superior animals; (3) ontological notions that, as living creatures, animals and trees have rights in themselves and so are worthy of respect regardless of their effect – positive or negative – on human beings (different ethical gradations exist, of course);<sup>14</sup> and (4) biological awareness of the interconnections among all organisms, objects, and events in the Earth's biosphere.

<sup>13</sup> Singer, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> The individual's right not to be harmed must also be extended to animals, so that killing animals has to be at least “well justified”: “Thus, the members of the whaling industry, the cosmetic industry, the farming industry, the network of hunters-exporters-importers must justify doing so [killing whales]. . . . Possibly the rights of animals must sometimes

As we see, then, animals' values can be recalibrated by knowledge, and in the following two sections we will see that other entities have been similarly transformed. Exploring these newly valued items will reveal a vast quantity of "things" that we can use as a guide to returning worth to many undervalued people around the world.

### Land, Organisms, Species, and Ecosystems

Like individual species of animals, entire ecosystems have, in many cases, also been granted greater value. Biotic communities are as real as human communities: they are dynamic and unstable in the same way, so that morally they can be considered coordinated "wholes." All the individuals – soil, water, plants, and animals – are members of an interdependent community, a "land pyramid," in Aldo Leopold's words.<sup>15</sup> This author, who defines conservation as "a state of harmony between man and land," observes that some biotic communities – marshes, bogs, dunes, and deserts, for example – lack economic value and are generally ascribed less value of other kinds as well. "Unlike higher animals, ecosystems have no experiences; they do not and cannot care. Unlike plants and organisms, ecosystems do not have an organized center and do not have genomes. They do not defend themselves against injury or death. Unlike a species, there is no ongoing telos, no biological identity reinstated over time."<sup>16</sup> Ecosystems do, however, have a "systemic value," and not just because they contribute to human experiences.

The practice of applying ethics to ecological settings and external objects can be seen as a product of evolution itself, that is, either as a biological "limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence" or as a "differentiation of social from antisocial conduct."<sup>17</sup> Put another way, we could say that some moral behaviors exist because of natural selection. Our primitive ancestors had no idea that they had genes and, consequently, no interest in their transmission. How, then, did some gene lines survive?

Natural selection rewarded creatures with altruistic feelings, and evolution favored impulses "that originally served to enhance their own genotypic reproduction, but which were deflected to broader social ends in changed circumstances."<sup>18</sup> Thus altruism can be seen as an expression of the selfish gene, but altruistic behavior serves purposes beyond mere

give way to human interests. . . . Nevertheless, the onus of justification must be borne by those who cause harm to show they do not violate the rights of the individual involved." (Regan, 1998, p. 539)

<sup>15</sup> Leopold, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>17</sup> Leopold, 1933, p. 634.

<sup>18</sup> Baird Callicott, 1998, p. 154.

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self-centered pursuits: is not Leopold's idea of a biotic community related to this kind of biological altruism? Some biologists<sup>19</sup> problematize this relationship between biology and morality and distinguish between biological altruism, which yields collective reproductive benefits, and vernacular altruism, which involves disinterested generosity among human beings. Edward Wilson offers skeptical observations on the biological origins of altruism: it would be a kind of "bounded rationality" of the human brain, he says, that makes simple empathy an efficient rule of thumb. From his perspective, altruism is a logical form of self-promotion or preservation that can be compared to Machiavellian strategies.<sup>20</sup>

Philosophically speaking, Leopold's idea of environmentalism as a product of evolution can itself be seen as related to the Millian "freedom . . . of pursuing our own good in our own way" without attempting "to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it" in the sense that we also limit our freedom when we attribute values to external objects, or, in other words, when we practice altruism.

## Caring People, Caring Things

Assuming different ethical perspectives is, of course, essential if we are to see difficult issues in new ways and ultimately recalibrate our value systems. Take the field of ecofeminism, for example, whose adherents see women's traditional role of caring for children and "local environments" as part of a mythical matrilineal past, a peaceful agrarian era untainted by the mechanistic modern technology that has now severed the connection between people and nature.<sup>21</sup> As a patriarchal and "rational" worldview has become privileged, the value of both nature and care giving has diminished. For ecofeminists, the argument is simple: women, who, like nature, have been considered "things" for millennia, have an immediate and "organic" relationship with the natural order – that is, with other things – that affords them a more loving, less arrogant perception of the nonhuman world than that held by men. A holistic, spontaneous pluralism is considered a natural component of the female worldview, but attendant characteristics – skill in and a propensity for care giving, for example – have always been considered emotionally centered behavior and therefore outside the realm of traditional ethics. Ecofeminists, however, contend that these very qualities make women ideally qualified to care for both people and their environments and to teach others these skills. The ethics of care is aware of the embodiment of the self and thus of

<sup>19</sup> For example, Sober, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Wilson, 1998b, p. 486. On the evolutionary origins of moral principles, see also Maienschein and Ruse, 1999, and the recent de Waal, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> On the impact of technology on women, see Bush, 2000.

the importance of things that surround human beings. It is a “local” ethics that functions in private and situated settings and is, as a result, removed from the dominant patriarchal tradition, which values the simplicity of clear-cut abstractions – rules and principles that create an order unburdened by human complexity.<sup>22</sup>

### Preserving Things: Technosphere/Biosphere, Human/Nonhuman

Many animals, species, and biotic communities, among other things, are nonhuman entities whose value must be preserved, or in some cases reestablished, and they too can be redefined by learning to think differently about them. Are scientific advances and new knowledge needed to accomplish these goals?

While evolutionary changes are slow and local, human actions can cause sudden massive change; problems often result when human intervention accelerates the normal rate of extinction, hybridization, or speciation. Consequently, it is our duty to anticipate the possible ramifications of our actions. Understanding the scale of potential environmental changes can help us make wiser choices about the ecosystem and its preservation, as is clearly explained by Baird Callicott:<sup>23</sup> *Homo sapiens* must ethically evaluate any changes made to the land to ensure that such projects are conducted on an appropriate scale, thereby minimizing environmental impact. This question of scale is important, for example, when analyzing present-day mass species extinction, a phenomenon that can occur naturally but is certainly hastened by rash human manipulation of the environment. And while long-term atmospheric shifts have occurred for millions of years, the rapid rate of global warming of the last century is abnormal; the environmental change is clearly anthropogenic, as much scientific evidence indicates.

A new moral construct has become necessary because of the tremendous impact that human behavior has on the world: we must now address the issue of the technosphere, that is, the human-made techno-social world in which ecological problems are examined in their social and political contexts. Overpopulation, sustainability, industrial-chemical pollution, social justice, the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, chemical pesticide use, genetic mutations, and biodiversity destruction are just some of the issues related to the life of the technosphere.<sup>24</sup> In the past – in ancient Greece and Rome, for example – damage to species and to the environment were

<sup>22</sup> Plumwood, 1998. On the role of care giving in ethical knowledge and reasoning, see chapter 6 of this book.

<sup>23</sup> Baird Callicott, 1998.

<sup>24</sup> The religious arguments in favor of protecting biodiversity, mainly related to the story of Noah, are illustrated in Nagle, 1998b, and Kates, 2000.



local and limited, but at present, corporate and megatechnological forces have inextricably linked human beings with wildlife, and the result is nonsustainability at the global level. Population biologists calculate that one or two billion human beings worldwide, living at a basic-needs level of consumption, is the maximum number of people the Earth can support and still maintain ecological sustainability; in 2006, the number is already well past six billion.

In an attempt to deal with such challenges, deep ecology assigns inherent moral value to groups of external things (nonhuman life)<sup>25</sup> that include more than just plants and animals: even things that are usually thought of as nonliving, like rivers (watersheds), landscapes, and ecosystems, attain enhanced value. In this way, Kant's famous maxim undergoes a kind of ethical Copernican revolution: no natural object is considered solely a resource; no "natural" thing can be treated merely as a "means." Natural things do not "belong" to humans, as contended in the traditional anthropocentric view: "Humans only inhabit the lands, using resources to satisfy their vital needs. And if their non-vital needs come into conflict with the vital needs of nonhumans, then humans should defer to the latter."<sup>26</sup> The self-realization of humanity can be reached only if "self" means something very large and comprehensive.

For some people, the free market itself is considered a solution to the environmental crisis. It is well known that politicians and bureaucrats are rewarded for obeying economic pressure groups rather than cooperating with ecological ones. But the market forces that destroyed environments in the past can change attitudes in the future and even address unsolved ecological problems. Such benefits, however, would require that full value – value as end – be given to the property, allowing owners to make decisions from a more fully informed position.

Green-market environmentalism holds that an unregulated market inevitably generates a crisis, and it advocates green taxes to offset the ecological costs incurred. It also asserts that a corporation must assume responsibility for the ecological outcomes brought about by its products, for sustainability requires that prices reflect not only the cost of production but also the cost of repairing any damage to the environment. Many transitions, in fact, must be effected: tax systems must be reformed, linear systems reshaped into cyclical ones, methods of production recalibrated, consumers educated, and human health addressed in ecological terms, to name a few. Donald Fuller<sup>27</sup> contends that the returns of sustainable marketing can be great: the approach can be viewed not as "a pious

<sup>25</sup> Naess, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>27</sup> Fuller, 1999, p. ix.

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exercise in corporate altruism” but as a kind of strategy where “customers win (obtain genuine benefits), organizations win (achieve financial and other objectives), and ecosystems win (functioning is preserved and enhanced) at the same time.”<sup>28</sup> Of course, the problem of sustainability is exacerbated by the recent trend in business toward commodifying cultural needs without regard for the potential negative effects on human dignity.<sup>29</sup>

Liberal environmentalists, in turn, contend that government regulation must be extended to prevent future environmental damage: the liberal ideal of concern for others can be extended to nonhumans, animals and living objects as well as ecosystems.<sup>30</sup> These environmentalists view any taxation as regressive; if producers are charged for externalities, they will pass on the cost to consumers, and the poor will end up shouldering a disproportionate financial burden. In this view, penalizing the producer is preferable, even if damages are not local and apprehending the criminal is difficult.

Many authors observe that the invisible hand of the market cannot be trusted to prevent ecological crises, and huge, market-driven industries and firms continue practices that are simply unsustainable. It is also maintained that assigning a price to sickness and suffering, not to mention to animal and human life, is a very tricky business indeed; such cost-benefit analysis also discounts the value of future human beings’ lives. Environmental imperatives are matters of principle that cannot be bargained away in an economic fashion. Some commentators usefully stress a very interesting paradox of liberalism – that in matters of conservation, one could maintain that neutrality toward others’ behavior is necessary to protect their freedom of choice. It is evident, however, that this notion conflicts with the fact that the destruction of natural things limits the freedom of those future human beings who will be deprived of both choices and competing ideas that would have been options had the destruction not occurred.<sup>31</sup>

The problem of continuously destroying natural goods and things, which results from a failure to value them adequately, is illustrated in

<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Kates, 2000, and Flavin, 2000, discuss the “energy revolution” in terms of sustainability.

<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, is it possible to think of a commodification of intrinsic values like human dignity, in our era of increasing technological and all-encompassing commodification of a large part of sociocultural needs, aspects, and endowments? I maintain that in some sense this could be welcome and good, if related to a respect for egalitarian rights. Intertwining economic relationships with some aspects of human dignity could coincide with a certain degree of social demand and need for them. I will consider this issue in chapter 5, in the section “Commodification of Human Dignity?”

<sup>30</sup> de-Shalit, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398.