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Perspective

For goodness sake! What is intrinsic value and why should we care?

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, conservation planning, policy, and communications have increasingly emphasized the human benefits, or "ecosystem services," provided by nonhuman nature. In response to this utilitarian, anthropocentric framing, some conservationists have countered that nonhuman nature is valuable for more than its instrumental use to humans. In other words, these critics maintain that nonhuman nature has intrinsic value, which the ecosystem services paradigm fails to duly acknowledge. Proponents of the ecosystem services approach have responded in turn, either by proposing that intrinsic value can be integrated into the ecosystem services framework, or by justifying the pull away from intrinsic value on the grounds that it does not motivate broad support for conservation. We suggest these debates have been clouded by an ambiguous conceptualization of intrinsic value, which in fact has a rich intellectual heritage in philosophy and environmental ethics. We therefore review some of the major work from these literatures, to provide members of the conservation community with a deeper understanding of intrinsic value that, we hope, will inform more focused and productive discourse. Following this review, we highlight two common ways intrinsic value has been misinterpreted in recent debates around ecosystem services. As a result of these misinterpretations, we argue, the non-anthropocentric ethical concerns raised by many critics of the ecosystem services approach remain effectively unaddressed. We conclude by offering logical, practical, and moral reasons why the concept of intrinsic value continues to be relevant to conservationists, even and especially in the emerging ecosystem services paradigm.

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"Just because a theory is demanding does not mean that one should reject it"

[(Hale, 2011, p. 50).]

1. Introduction

Over the past fifty years, conservation has evolved with changing views about humans, nonhuman nature, and the intersections between social and ecological systems (Mace, 2014). Conservationists today use different practices to achieve a range of objectives (Sandbrook et al., 2011), but they all work to realize some idea about how the world ought to be. Conservation, in other words, is a normative endeavor (Barry and Oelschlager, 1996). In the latter part of the 20th century, many conservationists grounded their mission in the recognition that nonhuman nature is good for its own sake, and therefore ought to be preserved. This idea was captured with reference to the intrinsic value (IV) of nonhuman nature, or some part of it (e.g., Noss, 1991; Soulé, 1985). Over the past decade, the argument that nature should be protected because it has IV has been challenged (e.g., Maguire and Justus, 2008; Marvier and Wong, 2012) and increasingly supplanted by an approach emphasizing nature's instrumental value for humans, often called "ecosystem services" (ES).

IV still grounds the mission of many conservationists (Fisher and Brown, 2014), and is the cornerstone of the Society for Conservation Biology's first organizational value: "There is intrinsic value in the natural diversity of organisms, the complexity of ecological systems, and the resilience created by evolutionary processes." However, in some corners of the conservation community, a certain weariness with IV and the debates surrounding it has become palpable (e.g., Chan et al., 2016; Marvier and Kareiva, 2014b). Notably, Tallis and Lubchenco (2014) received over 200 signatures on a letter proposing we move beyond "philosophical debates" (p. 27) around IV, which putatively "stifl[e] productive discourse, [inhibit] funding and [halt] progress." Cast in this light, debate over IV is merely distracting the community from making concerted empirical efforts to determine "what works and what fails in conservation" (Tallis and Lubchenco, 2014, p. 28), with the implication that where nonhuman IV "fails" as a motivation for conservation, other strategies that are more likely to "work" should be employed (e.g., Kareiva, 2014; Pearson, 2016). This line of reasoning, coupled with the claim that in many or most cases approaches emphasizing the human benefits of nonhuman nature work better than approaches emphasizing its IV (e.g., Marvier and Kareiva, 2014a) might seem to suggest IV is becoming irrelevant, or at best trivial, to conservation practice and policy. Far to the contrary, in this paper we demonstrate that IV is not only pertinent to, but in fact underlies, the ecosystem services paradigm in conservation.

Although invoked frequently and debated fiercely, IV is often only loosely defined in the ES literature (Justus et al., 2009). This would not be problematic, per se, except that certain recurring patterns in the discourse suggest a basic misunderstanding of the concept of IV, and nonhuman IV in particular. We suggest greater conceptual clarity will not only enhance conservationists' understanding of IV and their ability to engage in focused, productive dialogue around it; but that it will also speak to the continuing relevance of IV for the conservation community. Therefore, in the first part of this paper we review some of the philosophical and environmental ethical literature on IV. Several commentaries on or reviews of IV in the context of conservation have been published in the past decade (Davidson, 2013; Justus et al., 2009; Sandler, 2009; Vucetich et al., 2015). Vucetich et al. (2015) most recently gave an overview, clarifying a set of common conceptual and empirical misinterpretations of IV in the conservation and ecology literatures. We expand upon this work by providing additional background from philosophy and environmental ethics. Following our review we discuss two ways IV has been misunderstood in the recent ES literature, hindering productive discussion and leaving critical concerns about ES unaddressed. Finally, we offer a defense of IV, suggesting logical, practical, and ethical reasons why the concept is and should be considered deeply important to the conservation community, even and especially as the ES paradigm becomes increasingly influential in conservation.

2. Review methods

The term "intrinsic value" signifies recognition of fundamental goodness in the world (e.g., Korsgaard, 1983; Moore, 1993; Zimmerman, 2001). Though it may appear quite basic at first glance, the concept of IV is complex, with philosophically rich ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions (see Box 1). Philosophers have characterized these dimensions differently, and it would be misleading to suggest any one, monolithic concept of IV emerges from the philosophical literature. Therefore, rather than simplifying a contested and multi-faceted concept into any more precise, singular definition, in this review we will explain major differences in how IV has been characterized over the years. Though our review is not exhaustive, the literature we cover was selected because it exemplifies prominent themes in the philosophical work on IV.

Philosophy's many subdisciplines can be categorized in various ways, but in this review we make a fairly coarse distinction between literature from general Western philosophy and literature from environmental ethics, a relatively young subdiscipline concerned with the proper relationship between humans and nonhuman nature (Des Jardins, 2001). We briefly outline two major schools of thought about IV from the general philosophy literature, focusing on elements of these theories that might be of interest or importance to the conservation community, before turning to a longer review of the literature on IV from environmental ethics.

3. IV in general Western philosophy

Following Bradley (2006), we distinguish between two major schools of thought on IV, one generally aligned with the work of G.E. Moore (1873–1958), and the other more closely aligned with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). These two camps diverge primarily in identifying different types of things as bearers of IV (an ontological distinction), which in turn leads to different ideas about how humans ought to conduct themselves in relation to IV (an ethical distinction).

3.1. Moorean IV

On Moore's account, IV is an unobservable (what philosophers call "non-natural") and yet objectively real property possessed by states of affairs in the world, rather than specific objects or entities (Moore, 1993; see also Bradley, 2002; Lemos, 1994; Zimmerman, 2001). For example, consider a situation in which Mabel is pleased. On Moore's account of IV, the situation "Mabel being pleased" has IV, but Mabel herself does not. IV is at times represented with variables, e.g., as some state of affairs P, which pertains to some being x at a specific time t, or [x, P, t]