AGAINST RELATIONAL VALUE

In some environmental circles, talk of relational values is very much in fashion. It is said that we must think in terms of such values if we are to understand how such things as canyons, mangroves, and coral reefs matter to people. But that is bad advice. Appeals to relational values are typically misleading in several respects. Granted, those who make such appeals often do so in order to make the important point that some values are neither intrinsic nor instrumental in form; but that point can be made more clearly by referring to other concepts, such as that of constitutive value. To this objection, some may respond that appeals to relational value are nonetheless useful. However, as things stand, their usefulness remains unproven.

In recent years, the concept of relational value has come to play an increasingly prominent role in discussions of environmental values. A few years ago, next to no one was talking about it; nowadays, there are academic workshops on relational values, PhD theses on relational values, legions of academic papers on relational values, even a special issue of a high-impact journal devoted to relational values.[1] Academic discussions of nature's value—or some of them at least—have been swept up in a 'wave of "relationality."'[2] And talk of relational values has not been confined to academia. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has actively promoted thinking in terms of the concept. Its 2019 Global Assessment flatly states that a "shift from top-down environmental policy to bottom-up inclusive socio-ecological policy requires . . . the expansion of the value system related to biodiversity to include relational values . . ."[3]

For researchers at the IPBES and elsewhere, the way forward is clear: if we are to understand how such things as canyons, mangroves, and coral reefs matter to people, then we must think in terms of relational values. But that, I shall argue, is bad advice. The case for thinking in terms of relational values is weaker (and the case against stronger) than is typically supposed.

Intrinsic values, instrumental values, and constitutive values

What are relational values? The question isn't easy to answer. Nice, crisp definitions are not available; indeed, as we shall see, it is hard to pin down what relational values are supposed to be.

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[1] Volume 35 of *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*.

[2] Sanna Stålhammar and Henrik Thorén, 'Three Perspectives on Relational Values of Nature', *Sustainability Science* 14 (2019): 1201-1212, at p. 1201.

[3] IPBES, *Global Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, E. S. Brondízio, J. Settele, S. Díaz, H. T. Ngo (eds). (Bonn, Germany: IPBES secretariat, 2019), p. 432. Following the IPBES's lead, some other environmental organizations have expressly referred to relational values in their publications. The International Union for Conservation of Nature is one example (see, for instance, Iain J. Davidson-Hunt, Helen Suich, Seline S. Meijer and Nathalie Olsen (eds.), *People in Nature: Valuing the Diversity of Interrelationships between People and Nature* (Gland, Switzerland: IUCN, 2016), p. 52).

It is easier to work out what they are *not* supposed to be. For, on this matter relationalists speak with (almost) one voice: relational values are to be contrasted with intrinsic values on the one hand and instrumental ones on the other.[5] They are 'a third class of values'.[7] To acknowledge them is to transcend 'the dichotomy of intrinsic and instrumental values that has dominated environmental ethics for decades.'[8]

A thing has intrinsic value, in the relevant sense, if and only if it is valuable for its own sake.[11] By contrast, a thing has instrumental value if and only if it has a certain sort of value for the sake of something other than itself. To be more precise, it has instrumental value if and only if it is a means to a valuable end. So, in proposing that relational values are a third class of values, relationists mean to suggest that if we are to understand all the various ways that people value natural things, we must consider some values that fall neither into the category *intrinsic value* nor the category *instrumental value*.[13] Or, to put the point a little more precisely: if we are to understand the various ways people value those things, organisms, places, events, and processes that are neither human nor of human design, then we must think beyond the traditional distinction between intrinsic values and instrumental ones.[14]

So far as it goes, that is good advice. Natural things really can be taken to have *non*-instrumental value for the sake of certain humans. Consider the example of Oak Flat, an area of rugged crags and Emory oak woodland about 40 miles east of Phoenix, Arizona. It is home to a wide array of flora and fauna, including the yellow-billed cuckoo and the endangered Arizona hedgehog cactus. On January 15, 2021, the land's ownership was transferred from the federal government to Resolution Copper, a joint venture owned by the mining giants Rio Tinto and BHP. Resolution Copper plans to extract the vast copper reserves underlying the area by hollowing out spaces underneath them, causing them to collapse under their own weight—a method known as block caving. At Oak Flat, this method is expected to result in a

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[5] *Almost* one voice because the relationists Bryan Norton and Daniel Sanbeg argue that 'all environmental values are relational' ('Relational Values: A Unifying Idea in Environmental Ethics and Evaluation', *Environmental Values* 30 (6) (2021): 695-714, at p. 700).

[7] Kai M. A. Chan, Patricia Balvanera, Karina Benessaiah, et al., 'Why Protect Nature? Rethinking Values and the Environment', *PNAS* 113 (6) (2016): 1462-1465, p. 1462.

[8] Austin Himes and Barbara Muraca,'Relational Values: the Key to Pluralistic Valuation of Ecosystem Services', *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 35 (2018): 1-7, at p. 1.

[11] Granted, some relationists saddle the concept of intrinsic value with additional (and, in my view, unneeded) conceptual baggage. Some, for instance, would maintain that to say that something has such value is to say, not merely that it is valuable for its own sake, but also that some of its value is 'independent of any human experience or evaluation' (IPBES, *Global Assessment Report*, p. 1054). For a clear account of the various senses of 'intrinsic value,' see John O'Neill, 'The Varieties of Intrinsic Value', *The Monist* 75 (2) (1992): 119-137.

[13] I am therefore supposing that the relationists see themselves as describing how people do in fact value natural things rather than prescribing how such things should be valued. Accordingly, in what follows, I will refer not to what values natural things have but to what values they are *taken* to have.

[14] That rough account of what it means to be natural could be challenged, of course. I provide a more detailed account, as well as some responses to those writers, such as Bruno Latour and Steven Vogel, who object to talk of naturalness, in Chapter 8 of my new book, *How Nature Matters: Culture, Identity, and Environmental Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

two-mile wide crater.[15] As might be expected, Resolution Copper's plan has shocked environmentalists. It has also been challenged by local First peoples, such as the San Carlos Apache Tribe, for whom the area is sacred. According to Wendsler Nosie Sr., former chairman of that tribe, the place is 'part of our identity as a people.'[16] 'Oak Flat is everything that makes us who we are.'[17]

It is not my aim, here, to take a stand on this dispute. Instead I want to know what sorts of value Oak Flat is taken to have. Whether or not it is taken to have intrinsic value in the sense specified above, Nosie and others evidently value it on account of the benefits it provides to them. In other words, whether or not they regard the place as being valuable for its own sake, they evidently regard it as having value for their sakes. To see what *sorts* of value they take it to have for them, however, we must step back for a moment to consider some of the implications of something's having instrumental value.

The claim that *x* has instrumental value as a means to some valuable end, *y*, suggests that there could in principle be some *other* means to *y*.[18] It follows that if *x* has value *merely* as a means to *y*, then it will typically be the case that (all things held equal) *x* could be replaced, without loss of value, by any other equally effective means to *y*. So if Oak Flat were merely of instrumental value to Nosie as a provider of certain goods and services, then we might justifiably infer that it could be replaced, without loss of value, by any other equally effective provider of those goods and services. But Nosie's claim that Oak Flat is everything that makes the San Carlos Apache who they are implies that he does not take the place to be replaceable in this sense. To put the point crudely, it implies that he and his fellow Apache get something—namely a sense of cultural identity—out of the place.[19] But it also implies that that something could not be obtained in any other way. Were Nosie forced to leave Oak Flat for some other place, even one that supplied him with vast numbers of tremendously valuable goods and services, he would no doubt feel a sense of loss. The new place could not give him what he once got from Oak Flat—namely, his sense of who he is.

It seems, then, that Nosie values Oak Flat, not merely for its own sake, but also for his own sake and for those of his fellow Apache. Moreover, as relationists would point out, only some of that value seems to be instrumental in form. Nosie's claim that 'Oak Flat is everything that makes us who we are' implies that he takes the place to have some measure of non-instrumental value for his own sake.[20]

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[15] Max Norman, 'Lauren Redniss and the Art of the Indescribable', *The New Yorker*, July 23, 2021.

[16] Douglas Main, 'Sacred Native American land to be traded to a foreign mining giant', *National Geographic* 15 January 2021.

[17] Bri Cossavella, 'San Carlos Apache Tribe, environmentalists battle Oak Flat copper mine bid', *Cronkite News*, 19 December 2016.

[18] I say *suggests* rather than *entails* because in some cases *x* might be the only possible means to *y*, as my writing this paper is the only possible means to the end of my finishing it.

[19] I write '*sense of* cultural identity' to allow for the fact that it i s possible to have a mistaken sense of one's own cultural identity. (That said, I am not aware of any reason to think that Nosie himself is mistaken about his own identity.)

[20] For this reason, the place's cultural value cannot be adequately expressed in the instrumentalist idiom indicated by talk of 'ecosystem services.' It would be misleading, for instance, to conceive of Oak Flat's cultural significance to the San Carlos Apache in terms of its providing certain cultural ecosystem services. See further, Simon P. James, 'Cultural

What sort of value, exactly? Nosie's words provide a clue. The place, he said, is part of our identity as a people. *Part of*—those words suggest that Nosie takes Oak Flat to have value, not (or not only) as a means to some valuable end, but as part of a valuable whole. They indicate that he takes the place to have some measure of *constitutive value*: the value something has in virtue of its being part of a valuable whole. For Nosie, the Oak Flat seems, by virtue of the meanings it embodies, to form part of something that has value for him—namely, his sense of his own cultural identity. Indeed, Nosie's claim that the place is *everything* that makes him and his fellow Apache who they are suggests that he sees the place as having constitutive value as an essential—that is, non-replaceable—part of his sense of cultural identity.

The charge of redundancy

Much more argument would be needed to prove these claims. However, it seems that the relationists are right about one thing: in trying to understand why nature matters to people, we really must consider some values that are neither instrumental nor intrinsic in form. But it is not clear why they need to appeal to what is sometimes billed as a 'new concept'—that of relational value—to make that point.[22] The point can be made—as I have just done—by referring to more familiar concepts, such as that of constitutive value.

Relationists could respond in various ways. They could point out—correctly—that I haven't done nearly enough to show that anything that could be said in terms of relational values could be said just as well in terms of other sorts of values. But to that it may be replied that in disputes of this sort the burden of proof lies with those who hope to introduce the new concept. It is up to them to prove that concept's worth.

Some relationists will offer a different response. They will point out that to claim, as I have done, that Nosie takes Oak Flat to have constitutive value is to make a claim about the value attributed to a certain natural thing. However, they will continue, to think in terms of relational values is to focus one's attention on the values that are attributed, not to natural *things*, but to certain *relations* between such things and people.[23]

These relationists are, I believe, right to claim that some human-nature relations are taken to have value. But to say that some such relations can be taken to have value is not to

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Ecosystem Services: A Critical Assessment', *Ethics, Policy & Environment* 18 (3) (2015), 338-350.

[22] Relational value is described as a new concept in Matthias Winfried Kleespies and Paul Wilhelm Dierkes, 'Exploring the Construct of Relational Values: An Empirical Approach.' *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020): 1-14, at p. 1. For a different argument for the conclusion that talk of relational value can be perfectly translated into talk of other sorts of values, see Patrik Baard, 'The Goodness of Means: Instrumental and Relational Values, Causation, and Environmental Policies', *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 32 (2019): 183-199, at p. 196.

[23] See, for instance, Kai M. A. Chan, Rachelle K. Gould and Unai Pascual, 'Editorial overview: Relational Values: What are They, and What's the Fuss About?', *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 35 (2018): A1-A7, at A4. See also Norton and Sanbeg's objections to conceptions of value which encourage 'attention to objects' ('Relational Values: A Unifying Idea in Environmental Ethics and Evaluation?', *Environmental Values* 30 (6) (2021): 695-714, at pp. 702-3).

say that they must be taken to have a particular kind of value, still less a new kind. So it may very well be the case, as, for example, Luuk Knippenberg and his colleagues propose, that certain 'relationships with nature' are taken to have value.[24] Yet that point can be made by appealing, not to the concept of relational value, but to more familiar concepts. In fact, Knippenberg and his colleagues *themselves* argue that to think in terms of relational values is to recognise that certain 'relationships with nature have [or are at least taken to have] *constitutive value* and that *intrinsic value* can [or is at least sometimes taken to] reside in the relational triads of humans, nature and their relationship.'[25] In their account of what it means to think in terms of relational values, the concept of relational value plays no role.

Admittedly, some relationists are happy to say that natural *things* are taken to have relational value. For instance, Iain J. Davidson-Hunt and his colleagues suggest that relational values are 'attributed to entities'.[26] Similarly, Anna Deplazes-Zemp and Mollie Chapman maintain that a natural thing is taken to have relational value in virtue of the particular relationships that are held to obtain between it and the relevant valuing subjects.[27] These authors would, I expect, endorse my claim that Nosie takes Oak Flat to have a value that is neither intrinsic nor instrumental in form. What I call 'constitutive' they would probably call 'relational'.

The issue may seem merely linguistic—but our choice of term really does matter here. For the claim that there exist certain 'relational' values that may be contrasted with instrumental values on the one hand and intrinsic values on the other implies that neither instrumental values nor intrinsic values can be relational. It implies, *falsely*, that values of neither sort can depend on the relations between what has value and anything else.

As it applies to instrumental values, that implication is not just false but obviously false: if *x* has instrumental value as a means to some valuable end *y*, then *x*'s value obviously depends on the relations between *x* and *y*.[28] And there are reasons to think that intrinsic values can be relational, in the relevant sense, too. As writers such as Christine Korsgaard and Shelly Kagan have argued, the fact that a thing is valuable for its own sake does not entail that it would retain some value 'even if there were nothing else in the Universe'.[29] On the contrary, to explain why some things are valuable for their own sakes one must refer to other things. Levi Tenen, amongst others, has argued that some natural things fall into this category. Some such things can, he suggests, be 'valuable for their own sakes on account of their relations to

[24] Luuk Knippenberg, L., Wouter T. de Groot, Riyan J. G. van den Born, et al., 'Relational Value, Partnership, Eudaimonia: a Review', *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 35 (2018): 39-45, at p. 39.

[25] Knippenberg et al. 'Relational Value', p. 39.

[26] Davidson-Hunt, et al., *People and Nature*, p. 52.

[27] 'The ABCs of Relational Values: Environmental Values That Include Aspects of Both Intrinsic and Instrumental Valuing', *Environmental Values* 30 (6) (2021): 669-693, at p. 675.

[28] Admittedly, some relationists acknowledge that instrumental values are, in this sense, relational. See, for instance, Himes and Muraca, 'Relational Values', p. 2.

[29] The quotation is from G. E. Moore, Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 68. See further, Korsgaard, 'Two Distinctions in Goodness', *Philosophical Review* 152 (2) (1983): 169-195, at p. 185; Shelly Kagan, 'Rethinking Intrinsic Value', *The Journal of Ethics* 6 (1998): 277-297, at pp. 285-7.

other things'. If he is correct, then it is misleading to imply that intrinsic values cannot be relational.[30]

Pragmatics

The relationists are right about several things. They are right to suggest that identifying environmental values requires careful 'empirical research on communities that live close to and depend upon their natural habitats.'[31] They are right to suggest that in thinking about why natural things matter we must consider values that are neither intrinsic nor instrumental in form. And they are right to suggest that those non-intrinsic and non-instrumental values tend to concern not just causal relations of the sort one might expect natural scientists to discover but also what might be called relations of meaning.[32] Yet appeals to relational values are problematic in at least two respects. First, it is unclear what it *means* to appeal to such values. Is it to make a point about what has value? Or is it to make a point about what sorts of values there are? The truth is hard to make out—so hard, in fact, as to call into question talk of the very *concept* of relational value. Second, appeals to relational values are sometimes (I would suggest, often) unnecessary. In such cases, the useful points the relationists mean to make could be more clearly made in other ways. As I suggested above, they can sometimes—again, I would say, often—be more clearly made by appealing to the distinction between something's having value as a means to a valuable end (instrumental value) and its having value as a part of a valuable whole (constitutive value).[33]

To these objections, relationists might respond that, even if appeals to relational values unsettle pedantic academic philosophers, they are nonetheless *useful*. They might contend that even if more work is needed to shore up their conceptual foundations, appeals to relational values can nonetheless 'help communities to better understand, articulate and negotiate regarding what to do'.[34]

But are appeals to relational values really as useful as relationists suppose? Although some have tried to marshal empirical evidence that they are, their arguments are open to question. After all, as we saw, it is unclear what relational values are supposed to be and what sorts of things are supposed to have them. Given this lack of clarity, one might justifiably question any study which is meant to show that it is useful to appeal to such values. For, of any such study, one might justifiably ask *what* exactly it is supposed to be about.

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[30] Tenen, 'No Intrinsic Value? No Problem: Why Nature can Still be Valuable for its Own Sake.' *Environmental Ethics* 42 (2) (2020): 119-133; compare O'Neill, 'The Varieties of Intrinsic Value', p. 125. I am grateful to Rogelio Luque-Lora for pointing out to me that to contrast relational values with instrumental values and intrinsic values is to imply, falsely, that neither instrumental values nor intrinsic ones can be relational. He clarifies and defends that claim in his forthcoming paper 'The Trouble with Relational Values.'

[31] Norton and Sanbeg, 'Relational Values', p. 699.

[32] See, for instance, Unai Pascual, Patricia Balvanera, Sandra Díaz, et al., 'Valuing Nature's Contributions to People: the IPBES Approach', *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* (2017) 26: 7-16, p. 15.

[33] I explain and defend this claim in *How Nature Matters*.

[34] The quotation is from Norton and Sanbeg, 'Relational Values', p. 708. Chan et al. acknowledge the need for more work on the conceptual foundations of such appeals in their 'Editorial Overview' (p. A3).

Consider Sarah C. Klain et al.'s paper 'Relational Values Resonate Broadly and Differently than Intrinsic or Instrumental Values, or the New Ecological Paradigm'.[35] In conducting the research presented in that paper, Klain and her colleagues designed a survey consisting of 21 statements about environmental values, each of which was supposed to indicate a distinct sort of value (relational, intrinsic, instrumental, etc.). Respondents were asked to indicate their attitude to each statement on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'highly disagree' to 'highly agree'. For example, agreement with the statement 'Natural resource extraction is necessary for countries to develop' was taken as evidence that the relevant respondent was thinking in terms of nature's instrumental value.[36] Agreement with 'Plants and animals, as part of the interdependent web of life, are like "kin" or family to me, so how we treat them matters' was, by contrast, taken as evidence that the respondent was thinking in terms of relational value.[37]

The survey was distributed to three groups of people: Costa Rican farmers, international tourists in Costa Rica, and residents of U.S. coastal New England states. After analysing the several hundred responses, Klain and her colleagues concluded that framing 'conservation with relational values' may not just 'offer more powerful leverage for conservation than emphasis on instrumental or intrinsic values' but also 'inspire the action necessary to cultivate a future better for humans and other species.'[38]

Yet Klain et al.'s study does not justify those conclusions, for many of the statements included in the survey fail to pick out the sorts of values they are meant to pick out. Consider the way intrinsic value is handled.[39] Just two statements are supposed to refer to this sort of value—namely 'Humans have the right to use nature to meet our needs, even if this includes impacts that will take a decade or more to recover' and 'Humans have the right to use nature any way we want'.[40] Klain and her colleagues take disagreement with either of those statements to indicate a commitment to nature's intrinsic value. But that is a false supposition: in neither case does rejecting the statement straightforwardly indicate a commitment to nature's intrinsic value. Certainly, one can consistently deny that humans have the right to do whatever they want to natural things in order to meet their needs or satisfy their desires without attributing intrinsic value to any such things. For instance, a respondent's disagreement with either of the two 'intrinsic value' statements could indicate their general scepticism about appeals to rights and not any views they might hold about nature's intrinsic value.

Similarly, several of the statements that are supposed to indicate relational values do not unambiguously refer to relational values. In some cases, what Klain and her colleagues see as references to relational values could, just as well, be interpreted as references to

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[35] Sarah C. Klain, Paige Olmsted, Kai M. A. Chan and Terre Satterfield, 'Relational Values Resonate Broadly and Differently than Intrinsic or Instrumental Values, or the New Ecological Paradigm', *PLoS ONE* 12(8) (2017): e0183962, pp. 16-17

[36] Klain et al., 'Relational Values Resonate Broadly…', p. 5.

[37] Klain et al., 'Relational Values Resonate Broadly…', p. 5.

[38] Klain et al., 'Relational Values Resonate Broadly…', pp. 16-17

[39] Klain et al. recognize that their treatment of this value is inadequate (p. 4). It would have been better, I think, to have included a statement along the lines of 'Nature has value over and above the value it has for human beings,' where agreement is taken to indicate a commitment to nature's intrinsic value.

[40] Klain et al., 'Relational Values Resonate Broadly…', p. 5.

instrumental values. Take the statement 'My health or the health of my family is related one way or another to the natural environment'. Klain and her colleagues take agreement with that statement to indicate that the respondent is thinking in terms of relational values. But it could just as well be taken to indicate that the respondent regards nature as having instrumental value as a means to the valuable end of their—or their family's—health. In other cases, what Klain and her colleagues see as references to relational values could, just as reasonably, be interpreted as references to intrinsic values. Take 'I often think of some wild places whose fate I care about and strive to protect, even though I may never see them myself'.[41] Klain and her colleagues take agreement with that statement to indicate that the respondent is thinking in terms of relational values. But it could just as reasonably be taken to indicate that they are attributing intrinsic value to the wild places that mean so much to them.

To be sure, future work may support the pragmatic case for framing environmental issues in terms of relational values. Such work might even establish that appealing to such values can—to repeat Norton and Sanbeg's words—'help communities to better understand, articulate and negotiate regarding what to do'.[42] If that day arrives, then we may need to set aside any intellectual worries we have about appeals to relational values and get appealing. In the meantime, however, the pragmatic case for thinking in terms of relational values remains unproven. There remains a distinct possibility that thinking in that way might be not just conceptually intractable but also less useful than relationists would have us believe.

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[41] Klain et al., 'Relational Values Resonate Broadly…', p. 5.
[42] Norton and Sanbeg, 'Relational Values', p. 708.

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