Any animal-rights philosophers have emphasized the importance of recognizing the inherent or intrinsic value of animals in encouraging a deeper respect for non-human life. The intrinsic value of animals is contrasted with the perceived extrinsic instrumental value from the point of view of human utility. Intrinsic value is regarded by animal rightsists as taking precedence over an animal’s extrinsic value, because animals are ends in themselves rather than the means to satisfy purely human ends. However, we should not overlook the fact that animals and other existences are not purely ends in themselves. The deer has inherent value and a life of its own and a means to satisfy purely human ends. Predator species are always few in number. That the presence of 6 billion animals the size of Homo sapiens on this small planet is a biological aberration with devastating ecological consequences when those animals behave as predators.

In recognizing the extrinsic value of animals and other living things in their contribution to the harmony, beauty, and diversity of the biotic community, the animal rightsist moves conceptually toward a more holistic, ecological view. This has been lacking too long in the movement, as has respect for the intrinsic value of animals as individuals by the environmental and conservation movements.

Some philosophers, reflecting a fairly prevalent social consensus, believe that domesticated animals that were "created" by man for specific human use have less intrinsic value than wild animals. This is also fallacious, I believe, because it is indicative of an anthropocentric attitude toward nonhuman life that embraces the "naturalistic fallacy" alluded to earlier.

It may be reasoned that a being that is more intelligent and self-aware than another has greater intrinsic value. This, again, could be based upon anthropocentric and have racist and sexistist consequences. A hierarchy of intrinsic value, in terms of creatures’ “richness of experience,” can be based upon the complexity of their nervous systems. From this perspective (as proposed by Charles Birch and John B. Cobb in The Liberation of Life, Cambridge University Press, 1981), chimpanzees and whales have a greater intrinsic value than worms and mosquitoes. But is the life of the worm of equal importance to the worm itself as is the life of the whale to the whale? Furthermore, in focusing upon intrinsic value to the exclusion of extrinsic value (or vice versa), the natural paradox between the two is not appreciated. This is that organisms, such as the worm and soil bacteria, that, from an anthropocentric perspective, have less intrinsic value than, say, a more sentient and sapient wolf or human being, actually have a greater extrinsic or instrumental value in terms of their contribution to the integrity of the biotic community. Nothing will grow in sterilized soil devoid of worms and microorganisms.

Another considerable aspect, especially of non-sentient (or, more correctly, pre-sentient) existences, is their potential. The inherent potential of an individual human being is relatively finite compared to that of a plant or bacterium that can multiply asexually and clone itself. The inherent potential of, for example, embodying trace minerals, and of water—the basic elements incorporated into all life forms— is infinite. Thus, when contemplating that which St. Francis called “sister” water, we become aware of an existence that is devoid of consciousness, sentience, and intrinsic value in terms of having a life of its own. From that limited perspective, sister water is “inferior” to Homo sapiens. But, by virtue of her inherent potential, she is clearly superior, and, in terms of her extrinsic value to all life, she embodies those qualities that we associate with the saintly virtue of selfless giving to all life. When we begin to perceive other existences, be it from the sentimental anthropocentric perspective of St. Francis or from an instrumental yet holistic view of intrinsic/extrinsic value and potential, the notion of human “superiority” is shattered.

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It is important, I believe, to consider both the intrinsic and extrinsic value of all existences in arguing the case for animal rights and conservation. While “rights” language has its limitations, and some prefer to speak in terms of human obligations and duties, a great appreciation of the extrinsic value of natural organisms—of their place and role in nature—will bring an ecological/environmental perspective to the inherent value-oriented approach of the taking precedence and philosophy. We might ask of the presumably most sapient and sentient Earth species with the acclaimed greatest intrinsic value what extrinsic value it has in terms of contributing to the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. Had we the simplicity of bacteria, the humility of the deer, and the wisdom of the wolf, we might indeed, be of more value to the natural world.

The integrity of Creation has been defined by Charles Birch as “the recognition of the integrity and the intrinsic value of every living creature and the maintenance of the integrity of the relations of each creature to its environment.” This is the extrinsic/existential value of each creature in relation to other members that comprise the biotic community, as distinct from any human potential value that we might place on them.

Birch and Cobb have proposed a criterion for the rights or obligations of each creature. While this is a fact of nature, it is what I call a naturalistic fallacy to rationalize from this fact that, since animals prey upon and kill each other, we can be wrong with humans doing likewise. Predator species are always few in number. That the presence of 6 billion animals the size of Homo sapiens on this small planet is a biological aberration with devastating ecological consequences when those animals behave as predators.

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