

## **Neosentimentalism and Environmental Ethics**

### **I. Introduction**

Although versions of it have been around for at least 50 years, neosentimentalism (also referred to as rational attitude theory, a fitting attitude analysis of value, or a buck-passing account of value) has become increasingly popular in ethical theory in the last 15 years or so.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will suggest some ways in which neosentimentalism, and in particular a neosentimentalist account of value, might be useful to environmental ethicists. While the theory isn't without its drawbacks, it may well provide us with helpful solutions to some of the problems about the nature of value that have occupied the field of environmental ethics since its early days. In particular, a neosentimentalist understanding of value offers us hope for making sense of: (1) what intrinsic value might be and how we could know that nature has it; (2) the extent to which value is an essentially anthropocentric concept, and (3) how we might understand value in a way that is both naturalistically respectable and robustly normative.

In the first section of this paper, I describe the central tenets of neosentimentalism and explain how such a theory would analyze various claims about value. Next, I consider the three aforementioned issues within environmental ethics and show what a neosentimentalist approach to these issues would involve. I argue, first, that neosentimentalism gives us an explanation of the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic value – and shows us how we might think about which things have intrinsic value – in a way that doesn't rest on strange metaphysical claims or reduce questions about what we should

---

<sup>1</sup> The term neosentimentalism was introduced by D'Arms and Jacobson (2000). The other terminology mentioned above is from Anderson (1993), Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004), and Scanlon (1998), respectively.

value to questions about what we do value. Second, I argue that neosentimentalism gives us a better account of how value is tied to valuing, and in particular to *human* valuing, than competing accounts do. Third, I argue that while neosentimentalism doesn't entail naturalism, it is in principle compatible with a thoroughly naturalistic understanding of the world. Unlike some other naturalistic analyses of value, however, its naturalism doesn't involve reducing normative claims (about what is valuable) to descriptive claims (about what is in fact valued). In the last section of the paper, I survey some recent work on neosentimentalism in ethical theory, and consider what problems or objections such a view must overcome if it is to be successful. Ultimately, I argue that while it still faces nontrivial theoretical challenges, neosentimentalism might offer environmental ethicists a fruitful way of thinking about some familiar philosophical problems.

## II. From Sentimentalism to Neosentimentalism

In its broadest sense, sentimentalism is the view that "moral or evaluative concepts or properties depend somehow upon human sentiments."<sup>2</sup> This is a vague description, in part by necessity: there is considerable disagreement among sentimentalists about how exactly these concepts or properties depend on the sentiments. In spite of its vagueness, however, this description still distinguishes sentimentalism from some prominent alternatives: rationalist views such as Immanuel Kant's, according to which moral concepts or properties depend entirely on reason, and egoistic views such as Thomas Hobbes', according to which moral concepts or properties depend entirely on individual self-interest.<sup>3</sup> Sentimentalism came into its own as a moral theory in the eighteenth-century Britain. Its best-known proponent is probably David Hume; other proponents have included Anthony

---

<sup>2</sup> D'Arms (2005), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Slote (2006), pp. 219-20.

Ashley Cooper (the third Earl of Shaftsbury), Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and (Bishop) Joseph Butler.<sup>4</sup>

The central claim of sentimentalism is that morality – what it is and how we find ourselves motivated by it – can only be understood by looking at the main apparatus of human motivation, the sentiments. As Hume describes it,

The final sentence...which pronounces characters and actions amiable or odious, praise-worthy or blameable; that which stamps on them the mark of honour or infamy, approbation or censure...depends on some internal sense or feeling which nature has made universal in the whole species.<sup>5</sup>

Or as David Lewis more succinctly puts it, "values are what we are disposed to value."<sup>6</sup>

Sentimentalists have disagreed about how exactly the moral concepts are to be explained by appeal to the sentiments: some have taken the view that moral concepts are just expressions of a speaker's sentiments toward an object; others have claimed that moral concepts should be understood as "secondary qualities" – in essence claims about the kind of sentiment the object would provoke in normal observers under standard conditions; and so on.<sup>7</sup>

Sentimentalists have also disagreed about which particular sentiments are most central to morality: Hutcheson argued that benevolence was the foundation of morality; Butler also included justice; Hume and Smith focused on sympathy. (As sentimentalism progressed, its proponents tended toward greater and greater pluralism about value. That is to say, they increasingly thought of values as differing in kind, not just in amount, where the kinds corresponded to different moral sentiments. Thus, to be admirable was a matter of provoking admiration, to be lovable was a matter of provoking love, to be awesome was a

---

<sup>4</sup> For a historical overview of their respective theoretical innovations, see Darwall (1995). For primary sources, see Hume (1978), Hume (1975), Hutcheson (1994), Smith (1976); and Butler (1983).

<sup>5</sup> Hume (1975), pp. 172-73.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis (1989), p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> The first view is (or at least seems to be) expressed by Hume. See, e.g., Hume (1978), p. 470. It was later taken up by metaethical expressivists such as Charles Stevenson. See Stevenson (1997). The second view also has its roots in Hume; its central claim was briefly revived by dispositionalist accounts of value in the late 1980's. (For the latter, see Smith (1989), Lewis (1989), and Johnston (1989); for a discussion, see Mulligan (1998).) A neosentimentalist version of the second view was later popularized by John McDowell (1997). For a discussion of the many versions of sentimentalism that can be found in Hume, see Slote (2006), pp. 221-226.

matter of provoking awe, and so on.) What all sentimental accounts of value have in common, however, is the claim that it is human emotional responses that determine what is valuable.<sup>8</sup>

A sentimental account of value has many advantages. First, it allows for a fairly straightforward explanation of moral motivation – i.e., an explanation of how value ends up having the kind of normative grip on us that it does. If value were some mysterious, unanalyzable, nonnatural property that just happens to belong to some objects in the universe, it would be unclear why we should care about it or be motivated to try to promote it. But if value is essentially our own approval (or love, respect, endorsement, etc.), then it is clear why we would care about it – these attitudes are themselves *already* ways of caring. Sentimentalism also allows for a kind of pluralism about value that is explained by the differences among the sentiments. For example, a sentimentalist can give a relatively rich and informative account of the different moral role we attribute to things that inspire awe in us on the one hand, and things that we find useful or convenient on the other hand. It's not that awesome things necessarily have more value than useful things (after all, some things are really *very* useful), it's that they excite different passions in us, and those passions motivate different patterns of behavior. Finally, sentimentalism also promises to leave us with an understanding of value, and morality in general, that is consistent with a naturalistic understanding of the world. It doesn't require us to accept any claims about nonnatural or supernatural entities, transcendent moral truths, or (prescriptive) natural laws. All it requires is that we believe in the empirical claims of psychology and sociology.

The disadvantages of sentimentalism, however, are significant. Perhaps the most common worry about sentimental accounts is that the analysis they offer of normative concepts doesn't seem to capture the normativity of these concepts very well. If the claim 'X is valuable' is taken to mean 'X is normally valued by valuers,' then it is unclear why any

---

<sup>8</sup> D'Arms and Jacobson (2006), pp. 187-88.

individual moral agent would have a reason to promote/endorse/protect/etc. what is valuable. Perhaps the moral agent likes to go along with the crowd; perhaps she does not. Perhaps it is good to respect the valuing of others; perhaps it is better to challenge them. From the mere fact that X is normally valued, she cannot draw any conclusions about what attitude she ought to take toward X.

If the claim 'X is valuable' is taken to mean 'Hooray for X!' (i.e., to be just an expression of a positive sentiment toward X), then it is clearer why the speaker has reason to promote/endorse/protect/etc. X: after all, it is something toward which she is already positively disposed. But it is unclear why this expression would make a claim on anyone else. When the speaker tells me that X is valuable, she isn't telling me anything about X; she's telling me something about her own subjective attitudes toward X. These attitudes may or may not be something I have any reason to care about: this will depend on what my relationship is to the speaker, whether I think it is good for her to have this attitude toward X, whether I share her attitude toward X, and so on.

In both cases, the truth (or aptness) of the claim 'X is valuable' still leaves it an open question whether X is to-be-promoted/endorsed/protected/etc. But as many metaethicists have noted, this is not how normative concepts typically work. For X to be good, or valuable, or right *just is* for X to be the sort of thing that merits a favorable response. What makes normative concepts normative is that they are 'action-guiding': they issue 'oughts' to moral agents; they provide reasons for behaving in certain ways. The sentimentalist analyses of value seem to lose this feature. The mere fact that X is normally admired by people or is endorsed by someone who tells me "X is admirable!" doesn't yet provide me with any reasons for action. In fact, these facts/expressions alone will never provide me with any reasons for action; they need to be supplemented with normative claims of some kind (that I

should promote whatever is admired by others, that I should be supportive of others' valuing attitudes, etc.) in order to generate any reasons for action.<sup>9</sup>

Because classic sentimentalist analyses seem to leave us with an analysis of value that strips away its normativity, later theorists have tried to amend sentimentalist analyses in ways that preserve the normativity of the concepts they analyze. This has involved shifting from an analysis of value in terms of the responses that an object typically provokes to an analysis of value in terms of the responses that an object merits or ought (at least *prima facie*) to provoke. As far as I know, this type of analysis was first explicitly proposed by Franz Brentano.<sup>10</sup> More recently, this kind of view has been defended by Elizabeth Anderson, Gerald Gaus, John McDowell, David Wiggins, Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Ronnow-Rasmussen, and T.M. Scanlon.<sup>11</sup>

### III. Neosentimentalist Accounts of Value

Neosentimentalism, like sentimentalism, gives an account of value according to which the nature of value itself is essentially related to our practices of valuing. According to neosentimentalist accounts of value, for a thing to have value is for it to be a fitting or appropriate object of a valuing attitude. That is to say, to be valuable is just to be the sort of thing that merits or deserves to be valued in some way by valuers.

With a few exceptions (Brentano most notably), neosentimentalists have embraced the pluralism about valuing attitudes that began its development in earlier sentimentalist views. According to this pluralist picture, people rarely if ever simply *value* a thing; rather, they value it in a particular way: they admire it, or respect it, or are in awe of it, and so on. On a neosentimentalist account of value, corresponding to these particular valuing attitudes

---

<sup>9</sup> This worry is really what is at the heart of Moore's open question argument. See Moore (1993), pp. 66-69. For a discussion of how the open question argument bears on sentimentalism, see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000), pp. 726-727.

<sup>10</sup> See Brentano (1969).

<sup>11</sup> Anderson (1993); Gaus (1990); McDowell (1997); Wiggins (1997); D'Arms and Jacobson (2000); Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2000); Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004); Scanlon (1998).

will be particular kinds of value: admirability, respectworthiness, awesomeness, etc. To say that a thing is valuable, then, is just to say that it merits or deserves one or more of these particular valuing attitudes.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, on a neosentimentalist picture, to say that something is valuable isn't yet to say all that much. To say that a thing is valuable is just to say that it merits some valuing attitude or other; what we will really want to know is which attitude it is that is warranted.

The reason it is so important to know which attitude is called for is that different attitudes bring with them different norms for feeling and action. Consider for example the difference between the ways we think it appropriate to treat the proper objects of reverence on the one hand and love on the other. The fact that something is properly revered by us suggests norms involving a somewhat distanced, appreciative, and non-interfering role for the valuer. Love, however, brings with it a somewhat different set of norms; the fact that something is a proper object of love suggests norms involving a more active role: taking steps to nurture, protect, or otherwise benefit the beloved, interacting (or at least having some desire to interact) with the beloved, and so on. On a neosentimentalist view, it is only by identifying the particular way in which something is valuable (i.e., the particular kind of value that it has) that we can know how we ought to behave toward and feel about it.<sup>13</sup>

Among these particular valuing attitudes, some have a different structure than others. Some are what we might call intrinsic valuing attitudes – ways of caring about something for its own sake, or in its own right, while others are what we might call extrinsic valuing attitudes – ways of caring about something for the sake of some other valuable thing. According to neosentimentalism, then, the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic value is a difference between intrinsic or extrinsic valuing attitudes being merited by the valuable object. But again, as with 'being valuable' in general, 'being intrinsically valuable' and 'being

---

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Anderson argues directly for a pluralism of just this type. See Anderson (1993), Ch. 1.

<sup>13</sup> For a description of how these kinds of differences might matter to our orientation toward the natural world, see Lee (1994) (discussing primarily the differences between seeing nature as a fitting object of awe and seeing it as a fitting object of love).

extrinsically valuable' aren't very informative categories. To know that something is intrinsically valuable is just to know that it merits some intrinsically valuing attitude(s). For the purposes of ethics, we'll want to know which particular attitudes are warranted, since this is what will tell us which behaviors and feelings are appropriate toward the object.

A neosentimentalist account of value will also need an evaluative standard for determining when and in virtue of what different sentiments are in fact merited by different objects. Here the range of possibilities is almost as broad as the range of ethical theories itself. An evaluative standard that deemed sentiments merited just in case they would be felt by normal observers of the object under standard observational conditions would leave us with a theory all but indistinguishable from classic sentimentalism; an evaluative standard that deemed sentiments merited just in case they are commanded by a deity would leave us with a theory all but indistinguishable from divine command theory; and so on.

I think that the most promising type of evaluative standard is a procedural one, i.e., one on which a sentiment is deemed merited so long as the claim that it is survives a specified procedure for subjecting it to critical scrutiny. While a complete description and defense of such a procedure would require a much longer discussion than the current project will allow, it might be useful to sketch out a couple of general possibilities.<sup>14</sup>

One alternative is a view on which sentiments are merited by their objects insofar as the sentimental response to the object doesn't rest on or involve some sort of error. In order to determine whether a sentiment is merited or not, the procedure we would use would be one that looks for errors: we can call this the error-detecting procedure. There are at least three ways that a sentiment could be in error. First, it might violate general rationality conditions: it might be based on false beliefs about the facts, it might be the result of a mistake in reasoning, etc. For example, if the reverence I feel for Yellowstone National Park is based on the belief that it is the only remaining untouched, primeval wilderness left

---

<sup>14</sup> For a thorough and detailed description of this sort of procedural standard, see Anderson (1993), Ch. 5. See also Gaus (1990), §6.

in the United States, then my reverence is unwarranted (at least on these grounds), for it is based on a mistaken view of the facts. Second, a sentiment might be in error in virtue of violating requirements that come from the logic of the particular sentiments in question. Sentiments represent their objects as having particular qualities; for the sentiments to be warranted, the objects in question must really have these qualities. So for example, things that are awesome must be great in some way; if there is no greatness about a thing, then it is not an appropriate object of awe. Likewise, things that are fearsome must pose or be capable of posing a threat; if something cannot pose any threat, it is not an appropriate object of fear. Third, a sentiment might violate consistency requirements imposed by other sentiments. So, for example, the sentiment of fascination is *prima facie* inconsistent with the sentiment of indifference. On the error-finding version of the procedural evaluative standard, if we look for errors and cannot find where the valuer has gone wrong, we should conclude that her sentiments are merited and thus that the object is valuable in the specified way. On this view, insofar as we don't find any errors, we have reason to believe the sentiment merited; insofar as there actually aren't any errors, the sentiment *is* merited.

An alternative understanding of the procedural evaluative standard for sentiments would be one on which sentiments are merited insofar as they can be justified. Here, in order to determine whether a sentiment is warranted, we would ask whether sound reasons can be given in justification of it: we can call this the justification-seeking procedure. So, for example, if I claim that my boss is admirable, I must be able to provide some justification for this claim: an explanation of which traits my boss has that merit admiration, why these traits warrant admiration rather than contempt, and so on. On this view, in order to deny that a sentiment is merited by an object, one doesn't need to point to an error that the valuer has made – all one needs to do is note that the valuer has no positive reason for thinking that the object *does* merit the sentiment.

The main difference between the justification-seeking procedure and the error-detecting procedure is where the burden of proof lies. On the error-detecting procedure, a

sentiment is considered merited unless an error can be found. On the justification-seeking procedure, however, a sentiment is not considered merited unless there is some positive reason for it. The burden of proof will matter in cases where reasons are difficult to come by. So, for example, imagine that we disagree about whether slapstick comedy is funny – I find it hilarious and you do not. In this sort of case, though we disagree, we might not be able to identify an error in the other's reasoning. We also might not be able to come up with reasons that show why our own sentiment is the correct one to take. Using the error-detecting procedure, we would have to conclude that slapstick comedy really is funny (though you might not be able to appreciate it). Using the second procedure, we would have to conclude that slapstick comedy isn't really funny (though I might react to it as though it were). The upshot of this difference for our theory of value will be differing claims about whether things in what Elizabeth Anderson calls the "realm of tastes" can really have value. The error-detecting standard will say they can; the justification-seeking procedure will say they cannot.

#### **IV. Intrinsic Value**

The account of intrinsic value offered by neosentimentalism allows us to avoid certain theoretical problems that have been raised for some of the more popular accounts of intrinsic value within environmental ethics. On the one hand, there are accounts such as Holmes Rolston's that have understood the intrinsicness of intrinsic value metaphysically, as a matter of where the property value is "located."<sup>15</sup> As J. Baird Callicott explains this view, "The words *intrinsic* or *inherent* mean respectively 'the essential character of something' or 'belonging to the essential nature or constitution of a thing.' Thus, the very sense of the hypothesis that inherent or intrinsic value exists in nature seems to be that value *inheres* in

---

<sup>15</sup> Rolston also describes this issue using the language of "value ownership"; if a flower is intrinsically valuable, it "owns" its own value. See, e.g., Rolston (1988), p. 114.

objects as a natural characteristic, i.e., as part of the constitution of things."<sup>16</sup> According to Rolston, if the value of a flower is located in the flower itself, then its value is intrinsic; if the value is located elsewhere, for example in the subjective mental states of those who view the flower, then its value is extrinsic. To say that a flower has intrinsic value then, is to say that the value is *in* the flower: that it has the property of value in its own right, independently of whether any valuers might happen to come along and notice it, even independently of whether any valuers exist at all.

In responding to Callicott's own attempt to distinguish between the source of value (which on Callicott's view must be a valuer) and the location of value (which on Callicott's view is the object that the valuer values intrinsically) Rolston makes it clear what he means by the 'location of value' and makes clear that his meaning is very different from Callicott's. On Callicott's projectivist (and, in fact, sentimentalist) account of value,

[N]ature...is an orderly, objective, axiologically neutral domain. Value is, as it were, projected onto natural objects or events by the subjective feelings of observers. If all consciousness were annihilated at a stroke, there would be no good and evil, no beauty and ugliness, no right and wrong; only impassive phenomena would remain.<sup>17</sup>

Callicott claims that parts of the nonhuman natural world can still have intrinsic value on his view, since "something may be valuable only because someone values it, but it may also be valued for itself, not for the sake of any subjective experience...it may afford the valuer."<sup>18</sup>

Rolston however, criticizes this claim of Callicott's. He explains that on Callicott's view,

[T]here is no actual value ownership autonomous to the valued and valuable flower; there is a value ignition when humans come. Intrinsic value in the realized sense is subjectively generated, emerging relationally with the appearance of the subject-generator...The object plays its necessary part, though this is not sufficient without the subject.

...

---

<sup>16</sup> Callicott (1985), p. 261 (footnote omitted, citing *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1972). Cf. Bryan Norton's definition of what he calls "intrinsic value theory" in environmental ethics as "the theory that environmental values are to be understood as intrinsic to nature itself – values that exist independently of human values." Norton (2005), p. 161.

<sup>17</sup> Callicott (1986), p. 156.

<sup>18</sup> Callicott (1986), p. 142.

Despite the language that humans are the *source* of value which they *locate* in the natural object, no value is really located there at all.<sup>19</sup>

For Rolston, to determine the location of value it is not enough to ask how the object is valued by valuers, as Callicott does. We also need to ask metaphysical questions about the truth-makers of our value claims. If a valuer's subjective response is a necessary condition for the truth of the value claim 'the flower has intrinsic value,' then it cannot be the case that the value is simply located within the flower. At best, the *potential* for value is located within the flower. On Rolston's view, then, to say that value is really located in the flower would be to say that "some values are objectively there, discovered, not generated, by the valuer."<sup>20</sup>

There are two main worries that people have raised for this sort of view. The first involves a criticism that was first made (to my knowledge) by John Mackie of similarly realist, objectivist accounts of value.<sup>21</sup> Mackie's worry was that we don't seem to have the kind of evidence we would need to have in order to reasonably conclude that the value *is* located within the flower.<sup>22</sup> We can investigate the flower in every way we know how – dissect it, look at it every which way, run lab tests to determine its chemical makeup – but none of our usual methods for investigating the flower's inherent properties will be able to confirm or disconfirm the presence of the allegedly inherent property of value. As Bryan Norton, J. Baird Callicott, and Tom Regan (among others) have pointed out, this should be cause for serious epistemological concern.<sup>23</sup> If we cannot muster at least some evidence that the flower really does have the property 'value' inherent within it, then it is unclear why we

---

<sup>19</sup> Rolston (1988), pp. 114-15.

<sup>20</sup> Rolston (1988), p. 116

<sup>21</sup> Mackie's primary target is the ethical theory of G.E. Moore. While Moore and Rolston both subscribe to a kind of realist, objectivist metaethic, there are important differences between their views. Moore held that value ("goodness," in his terminology) is a nonnatural property, while Rolston claims that it is a natural property. Moore also claims that it is an unanalyzable concept, while Rolston explicitly offers an analysis in terms of the goal-directed behavior of organisms. The upshot of these differences for the purposes of Mackie's criticism is that the evidential challenge can be met more easily by Rolston than by Moore. However, as I argue below, Rolston's response to it only generates further problems.

<sup>22</sup> Mackie (1977), pp. 38-42.

<sup>23</sup> Callicott (1985), pp. 258-260; Norton (1991), pp. 234-35; Regan (1981), p. 33-34.

should be so sure that it does possess this property inherently, much less why others should believe our claim that it does.

There are various strategies for trying to escape this kind of problem. Some theorists have tried to argue that the property 'value' is really reducible to some more easily identified natural property. (A natural property is one that can, at least in principle, be investigated by the sciences.) Rolston, for example, argues that value is just the achievement of an organism's genetically-given goals. As Rolston describes the relationship, "We can say that the physical state the organism seeks, idealized in its programmatic form, is a valued state. *Value* is present in this achievement."<sup>24</sup> (Notice the inference involved in moving from the claim in the first sentence to the claim in the second sentence.) Peter Miller also offers a naturalistic analysis of value, arguing that value is just "richness" of certain kinds (specifically, of "resources, development, diversity, integrity, and utility").<sup>25</sup> The difficulty for these views then comes in explaining why we should think, not just that goal-achievement and richness are valuable, but that they are a correct analysis of what value itself *is*. The other strategy is to claim, as G.E. Moore did, that value is a nonnatural property. Unfortunately, this only makes the epistemological problem worse. Since a nonnatural property is one that by definition is not susceptible to investigation by the sciences (including the deliverances of our normal five senses), proponents of this view are left to posit the existence of some special moral faculty by which we can directly detect the presence or absence of the property 'value.' But this claim itself has been met with considerable skepticism – there doesn't seem to be much evidence that we do possess such a faculty.

The second worry that has been raised for views such as Rolston's is that it is unclear why the property of value so-described would or should have any normative grip on us. In metaethical terms, the worry is that Rolston's view rules out even the most minimal forms of

---

<sup>24</sup> Rolston (1988), pp. 99-100.

<sup>25</sup> Rolston (1988), pp. 98-100; Miller (1982), p. 109. For a discussion, see Callicott (1985), pp. 258-259.

internalism.<sup>26</sup> If value just turns out to be some property that inheres in parts of the natural world, much like carbon or magnesium, independently of whether we're around or happen to notice it, then it doesn't automatically follow from this that the presence of value is something that we ought to care about, desire, or seek to promote. That is to say, even if we can show that this property is in fact part of the fabric of the universe, we still need an independent argument to show that it is something we have any reason to care about. As we will see below, other accounts of value do a better job of this: once they describe what value itself is, it is easier to see why it is something we should care about. Of course internalism isn't the only metaethical game in town – one might well be an externalist. Failing to accommodate internalism, then, isn't automatically a failing of a view. That said, most metaethicists today accept some version of internalism (for reasons too involved to detail here), so failing to accommodate it is still likely to be considered a drawback.

In response to problems with views such as Rolston's, other theorists (such as Callicott, whose view was described earlier) have argued that the intrinsicness of intrinsic value should be understood not as a matter of where the property of value is 'located,' in Rolston's sense, (i.e., in the valued object vs. in the valuing subject), but rather a matter of how the object is valued by valuers (i.e., for its own sake vs. for the sake of something else). Callicott, for example suggests that we call a thing's value intrinsic ("inherent," in his terminology) "if (while its value is *not* independent of all valuing consciousness) it is valued *for itself* and not only merely because it serves as a means to satisfy the desires, further the interests, or occasion the preferred experiences of the valuers."<sup>27</sup> Callicott explicitly rejects Rolston's metaphysical requirements for intrinsic value; on his view, for value to be intrinsic, it need not be possessed by objects in a way that is ontologically independent of valuers and their mental states.

---

<sup>26</sup> Internalism, very roughly speaking, is the view that there is an essential connection between normative concepts and motivational states. What exactly that connection is has been the subject of considerable debate in metaethics.

<sup>27</sup> Callicott (1985), p. 262.

The worry about this kind of view is that because it claims that the way that we in fact value a thing determines what kind of value it has, it turns out to be impossible for our valuations to be mistaken.<sup>28</sup> According to Callicott's view, if we value an object as a mere means, it thereby has merely instrumental value. If we value an object as an end in itself, it thereby has intrinsic value. It is conceptually impossible on his view to say that while we respond to X as if it had merely instrumental value, we're wrong to do so because it actually has intrinsic value.

A related worry is that views like Callicott's leave general claims about what is valuable hostage to the existence and psychological idiosyncrasies of the psychology of actual valuers. If we valuers happen not to notice some particular feature of the universe, and therefore do not value it, it does not have value. If we notice it but for some reason don't value it, it does not have value. Before we existed and started valuing things, nothing could have value. The worry here is that our stories about which things are good and why don't seem to depend on the actual responses of valuers in quite the same way. We're more inclined to think that the Grand Canyon was beautiful even before any valuers were aware of it, that it would have been just as beautiful had valuers never happened upon it, and that it would still be beautiful even if every creature capable of experiencing beauty suddenly vanished.

A neosentimentalist account of value can, at least to some extent (see section VII for concerns) steer a path between the two types of account represented by Callicott and Rolston and in doing so avoid their respective problems. By defining intrinsic value by reference to the kinds of responses that would be appropriate from valuers, rather than by reference to the kinds of responses that are typically given by valuers, neosentimentalism makes 'X is valuable' a robustly normative claim (about what valuers ought to do) rather than a descriptive claim (about what valuers tend to do), as it would seem to be on Callicott's

---

<sup>28</sup> At least at the collective level. Presumably Callicott, like Hume, has the resources to say that an individual's valuative responses can be defective, though 'defective' here just means 'abnormal' or 'atypical.' What is impossible is for the normal responses to be mistaken.

view. This opens up the possibility that we don't in fact do what we ought to do, e.g., that we value things instrumentally even though their value is intrinsic.

Understanding value claims as the neosentimentalist does also gives us a more sensible way to think about what we're looking for when we're trying to determine whether an object has value. We're not hunting around for evidence that its essential nature includes some mysterious property called 'value,' nor are we asking purely scientific questions about whether it exhibits goal-directed activity governed by a set of genetic instructions; rather, we're asking what kinds of feelings and actions toward the object would be appropriate. Neosentimentalism's advantage isn't that it gives us a clear or easy answer to our questions about which things have value, as a theory that defined value as 'the experiencing of pleasurable mental states' might. But I think it does recast those questions in a way that is useful. I might not be able to tell you whether a giant sequoia has 'value' inside of it, but I can certainly tell you that it is awesome and majestic, and if you are skeptical, I can say a lot about what makes it that way. Neosentimentalism allows us to use the considerable resources we already have for assessing the nature and propriety of specific emotional attitudes (we already have detailed views about when it makes sense to be angry, resentful, grateful, surprised, etc.) to answer what might have seemed like relatively abstract questions about value. Finally, neosentimentalism makes room for internalism about value in a way that Rolston's and Moore's views do not. If for X to have value of some kind just is for X to deserve to be valued by us in some way, then we can see how a kind of judgment internalism (in which to sincerely judge that X is valuable is to judge that one has a reason – perhaps not an overriding reason, but *a* reason – to respond to X in certain ways) or existence internalism (in which for X to be valuable is for there to exist a reason to respond to X in certain ways) would follow fairly easily.

## V. Anthropocentrism

Neosentimentalism also provides us with a theory of value that can avoid some of the more troublingly anthropocentric implications of other theories of value. As I have described them here, both sentimentalism and neosentimentalism define value by reference to the sentimental responses of valuers in general rather than the sentimental responses of human beings in particular. In the case of earlier sentimentalist theories, this is perhaps historically misleading. Most of the early sentimentalists took it for granted that humans are the only valuers that exist. This, however, is an empirical assumption, and one that may not be as credible today as it seemed to be in the eighteenth century. In any case, I think that a neosentimentalist theory of the kind outlined above can capture the relationship between value and valuing that has motivated many anthropocentric accounts of value, while at the same time avoiding defining value in a way that is unwarrantedly anthropocentric.

Bryan Norton defines weak anthropocentrism as the view that "all value...is explained by reference to satisfaction of some felt preference of the human individual or by reference to its bearing upon the ideals which exist as elements in a worldview essential to determinations of considered preferences."<sup>29</sup> One worry that we might have about this account is that it seems to tie value, by definition, to the responses of members of our species and our species alone. If members of other species turned out to have felt preferences in much the same way that human beings do, Norton's view would not allow their preferences to be relevant to the question of what has value. Likewise, if space aliens landed on our planet and turned out to have the very same cognitive and conative capabilities that human beings do, their preferences would not be relevant to any of our claims about value. On the face of it, this seems to be arbitrarily speciesist. There is no good reason for thinking that the only preferences of *homo sapiens* could be relevant to the question of which things are good or bad in the world.

---

<sup>29</sup> Norton (1984), p. 134.

One motivation for Norton's anthropocentrism seems to be his desire to avoid a theory of value according to which value has very little to do with valuing. He often contrasts his view with Rolstonian accounts of intrinsic value, according to which the existence of value is ontologically independent from the existence of conscious beings to whom things might matter.<sup>30</sup> However, as I think the neosentimentalist theory sketched above makes clear, we do not need to choose between theories that make value entirely independent of valuing and theories that tie value specifically to human valuing. We can explain the essential and necessary relationship between value and valuing while leaving an open question which things in the world might be capable of the psychological behaviors involved in valuing.

Of course, in claiming this middle position neosentimentalism leaves itself open to criticism from both sides. On the one hand, we might think that neosentimentalism ought to tie value more explicitly to the sentimental responses of human beings. After all, the sentiments to which neosentimentalism refers all happen to be ones that are experienced by humans. This is surely not a coincidence. Our discourse about values and valuing is a human discourse developed to address human concerns; surely this is a fact that neosentimentalism can take account of.

On the other hand, we might worry that neosentimentalism ties value to valuing in a way that remains (*de facto*, if not *de jure*) objectionably anthropocentric. By analyzing value as a matter of meriting positive sentiments, neosentimentalism still makes value all about us: value is essentially a matter of our sentiments and the rules that govern their appropriate application. We might pretend to be species-neutral by referring to 'valuers' as opposed to 'human beings,' but let's face it: the only psychological states that we recognize as instances of valuing are ones that we also experience. At best, we can include members of other species by extension insofar as they seem to experience the same valuing sentiments that we

---

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Norton (2005).

do. Thus, while neosentimentalism might seem to avoid anthropocentrism in principle, it will not do so in practice.

I think, however, that the version of neosentimentalism I have described here is right to strike the balance that it does. While it might be true that our understanding of the sentiments and our discourse about value is mostly derived from the experiences of human beings, I see no reason for thinking that this indicates a deep conceptual truth about value. Rather, it seems to be the result of historical, contingent facts about our understanding of and familiarity with nonhuman beings in the world. While our conceptions of value may well be based on our shared experiences of the world as human beings, there is no reason for thinking that the concept of value must be defined by reference to a distinctly human perspective on the world.

On the other hand, if value is to be a normative concept, it must involve 'oughts' that are addressed to moral agents. That is why neosentimentalism is right to define value by reference to the responses that are appropriate from moral agents. In their application, normative concepts essentially involve rules for how we are to conduct ourselves. For this reason, they must take some account of facts about us: since they are telling us what to do, their claims will have to be tailored to behaviors of which we are capable. Norms for actions will have to involve actions that we can perform; norms for feeling and belief will have to involve psychological states that we can experience. If norms are to function as practical rules for guiding our behavior, they must take into account facts about what behaviors are open to us. The *de facto* anthropocentrism of neosentimentalism, then, is at least partly necessary for value to function as a normative concept for creatures like us. However, that the 'us' in the previous sentence is limited to human beings rather than including all cognitively and conatively sophisticated earthlings, or cognitively and conatively sophisticated earthlings plus space aliens, is simply a contingent matter. While we will always need normative concepts that are tailored to human behavioral capacities, we may someday add to these normative concepts that are addressed to other kinds of moral agents.

## VI. Value and Naturalism

Many debates within metaethics and also within environmental ethics have been about what kind of consistency we should require between our ethical theories and our naturalistic/scientific understanding of the world. Naturalism is roughly the view that all facts about the world either are natural facts or are explained by natural facts. In metaethics, views such as Moore's have come under fire for being at odds with a naturalistic understanding of the world (as Mackie's argument, mentioned above, essentially tried to show). In environmental ethics, debates about naturalism typically concern the extent to which our ethical theories need to be consistent with contemporary biology and ecology. (For example, Paul Taylor's account of intrinsic value was criticized for resting on Aristotelian biological claims that are considered incompatible with contemporary science.<sup>31</sup>) Most ethicists today, and particularly environmental ethicists, seem to agree that consistency with a naturalistic understanding of the world is a desirable feature in an ethical theory. The disagreement arises once we try to specify what kind of consistency we should be after.

Taken by itself, the neosentimentalist analysis of the nature of value is neutral between naturalism and nonnaturalism. Whether any particular version of neosentimentalism will turn out to be naturalist or nonnaturalist will depend on the account it offers of the appropriateness conditions for the sentiments. If the appropriateness conditions only involve reference to natural facts and properties (as the procedural evaluative standard described above did), then the resulting theory will be consistent with naturalism. If the appropriateness conditions refer to nonnatural facts or properties, then the resulting theory will not be consistent with naturalism. As a matter of fact, most neosentimentalists today advocate some version of naturalism.<sup>32</sup> What neosentimentalism does seem to rule out, however, is a simple reductive naturalism of the kind advocated by

---

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., Sober (1986).

<sup>32</sup> There is at least one prominent neosentimentalist, John McDowell, who advocates a nonnaturalist version of neosentimentalism. See McDowell (1997).

Callicott, Rolston, and the earlier sentimentalists. Neosentimentalism does insist that our theory of *what value is* be a theory that preserves the concept's normative character.

I think that neosentimentalism offers some hope for steering a clear path between naturalistic theories that reductively eliminate normativity and nonnaturalistic theories that preserve normativity. Of course the devil is always in the details, particularly when it comes to metaethics. Whether the details of such a theory can be worked out in a way that satisfies our requirements for naturalism (not to mention other theoretical desiderata) remains to be seen. Much will turn on what we think naturalism about morality requires (e.g., whether naturalistic explanations must be reductive in nature, whether they must reduce normative facts or claims to nonnormative facts or claims, whether we think natural facts must be able to explain what makes moral claims true/apt or whether it is enough for them to offer a causal-historical explanation of the existence of moral norms, and so on). Generations of metaethicists have been occupied with trying to answer these questions; I will not pretend here that there are simple or obvious answers to them. However, neosentimentalism does seem to leave room for many of the most plausible versions of naturalism, and in this regard, it has an advantage over theories that do not.

## VII. Outstanding Problems for Neosentimentalism

### *The Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem*

In the last five years or so, much has been written about a theoretical difficulty faced by neosentimentalism that has come to be called the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem.<sup>33</sup> The worry is essentially this: while neosentimentalism analyzes an object's value in terms of the sentiments that are appropriately felt toward it, not all reasons for the appropriateness of feeling a sentiment toward an object seem to be relevant to the object's value. For example, imagine that you have a boss who is particularly sensitive to the opinions that his employees

---

<sup>33</sup> D'Arms and Jacobson (2000) refer to this as "the conflation problem." For recent discussions of and attempted solutions to the problem, see Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004), Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2006), Olson (2004), Stratton-Lake (2005), and Väyrynen (2006).

have of him: he rewards those who admire him and fires those who don't. Also imagine that he is very good at detecting genuine admiration and that you are very bad at faking admiration. Finally, imagine that you love your job and are unlikely to be able to find another one if you are fired. In this case, there is a very real sense in which it would be appropriate for you to admire your boss (i.e., admiring your boss would be rational, warranted, the thing to do given the circumstances). But to say that it is appropriate to admire your boss for these reasons is not to say that he is admirable. It's just that circumstances can sometimes give one reasons to admire those who aren't really admirable. This is why neosentimentalism was defined above in terms of what *merits* or *deserves to be* valued rather than in terms of what we have any kind of reason to value. In the above example, you have reason to admire your boss, but your boss does not merit admiration – in fact, quite the opposite.<sup>34</sup>

The difficulty that this has been taken to raise for neosentimentalism is that of offering a principled and noncircular explanation of which kinds of reasons for valuing a thing are constitutive of its value, which are not, and why. While it may seem intuitively obvious that the implicit threat of losing your job is not a reason for admiring your boss that should be counted toward his admirability, it has turned out to be fairly difficult to specify exactly how it differs in kind from other reasons that we think should be counted. A number of different explanations have been offered, but as yet, none seems to be entirely unproblematic.<sup>35</sup> In any case, a successful solution to this problem must be found for neosentimentalism's claims about the relationship between merited sentiments and value to be defensible.

---

<sup>34</sup> This example is originally from McShane (2006).

<sup>35</sup> There is not room to review these solutions and their problems here; for details, see the sources cited in footnote 32.

### *Cognitivism about Valuing Attitudes*

Neosentimentalism requires that our moral claims be explained by appeal to which sentiments are warranted, and that which sentiments are warranted *not* be explained by appeal to moral claims.<sup>36</sup> If the latter requirement were not met, then we would be left with a circular explanation: e.g., one claiming that things are valuable because they merit positive valuation and that they merit positive valuation because they are valuable. In order to avoid this, neosentimentalists must explain the appropriateness conditions of moral concepts without relying on moral concepts to do so. Some have argued that avoiding circularity here also requires that our sentiments themselves not be formed as the result of a prior judgment about an object's moral properties.<sup>37</sup> If this is correct, it may be easier to make this claim for some sentiments than others. Some sentiments, such as resentment, seem to essentially involve a moral judgment (*viz.*, that wrongdoing has occurred).

While I think that this is a serious problem for versions of neosentimentalism that want to offer a neosentimentalist analysis of *all* moral concepts (or more ambitiously, all normative concepts), a neosentimentalist account of value only needs to be able to make the case that our *valuing* attitudes are not based on prior judgments about their objects' value. This is a slightly easier case to make, though it could still fail – if, for example, the reason that we respect things is that we judge them to possess intrinsic value.

### *The Valence of Valuing Attitudes*

Even though contemporary versions of neosentimentalism are broadly pluralistic, those who want to offer a neosentimentalist account of value need to be able to pick out which sentiments are ways of valuing their objects, which sentiments are ways of devaluing their objects, and which sentiments aren't ways of valuing or devaluing at all. This requires offering an account of what psychologists refer to as the valence of the emotions. Currently in psychology, there are a number of competing accounts of valence, each of which leaves us

---

<sup>36</sup> For an excellent discussion of this problem, see D'Arms (2005), pp. 14-18.

<sup>37</sup> See D'Arms (2005).

with a different account of the sentiments that are ways of valuing, the sentiments that are ways of disvaluing, and the sentiments that are nonvaluative.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, each of these theories has problems of its own; it is far from clear which of them (if any) will ultimately be able to provide us with a successful account of valence. In any case, an adequate neosentimentalist theory will have to say something about what constitutes the valence of a sentiment and how we can know which sentiments have what valence. Although this is by no means an impossible task, it will involve considerable work and require an active engagement with both empirical claims and theoretical constructs offered by contemporary psychology.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

Insofar as it is successful as a theory of value, neosentimentalism's success seems largely due to its theoretical modesty and flexibility. Neosentimentalism doesn't try to offer an account of the metaphysics of value; rather it gives us an explication of the concept of value that is compatible with many different metaphysical outlooks. It doesn't stipulate that value concepts be reducible to non-normative concepts, but it doesn't forbid reductionism either. It doesn't tell us which things in the world will turn out to have value, but rather helps us to get clear about what we're asking in posing this question.

This kind of theoretical modesty and flexibility may look to some like a bug rather than a feature. Because its strength is in helping us to ask clearer questions about what has value rather than providing us with answers to these questions, it may rightly be criticized for not being as useful as some alternative theories. In environmental ethics, however, I think there is a need for a view about *what value is* that can be more widely shared by theorists with varying metaphysical, epistemological, and normative commitments. Insofar as neosentimentalism is a minimal and flexible enough theory of value to allow for this, it might be of considerable use in environmental ethics.

---

<sup>38</sup> For a helpful overview of these accounts, see Prinz (2004), Ch. 7.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Elizabeth. 1993. *Value in Ethics and Economics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Brentano, Franz. 1969. *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Butler, Joseph. 1983. *Five Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and a Dissertation upon the Nature of Virtue*. Edited by Stephen Darwall. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 1985. "Intrinsic Value, Quantum Theory, and Environmental Ethics." *Environmental Ethics* 7:257-275.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 1986. "On the Intrinsic Value of Nonhuman Species." In *The Preservation of Species: The Value of Biological Diversity*, pp. 138-172, edited by Bryan G. Norton. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- D'Arms, Justin. 2005. "Two Arguments for Sentimentalism." *Philosophical Issues* 15:1-21.
- D'Arms, Justin, and Daniel Jacobson. 2000. "Sentiment and Value." *Ethics* 110:722-748.
- D'Arms, Justin, and Daniel Jacobson. 2006. "Sensibility Theory and Projectivism." In *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, pp. 186-218, edited by David Copp. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Darwall, Stephen. 1995. *The British Moralists and the Internal 'Ought': 1640-1740*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gaus, Gerald F. 1990. *Value and Justification: The Foundations of Liberal Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hume, David. 1975. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Niddich. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Reprint, from 1777.
- Hume, David. 1978. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Niddich. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Reprint, from 1740.
- Hutcheson, Francis. 1994. *Philosophical Writings*. Edited by R.S. Downie. London: J.M. Dent.

- Johnston, Mark. 1989. "Dispositional Theories of Value III." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supp. 63:139-174.
- Lee, Keekok. 1994. "Awe and Humility: Intrinsic Value in Nature. Beyond an Earthbound Environmental Ethics." In *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, pp. 89-101, edited by Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, David. 1989. "Dispositional Theories of Value II." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supp. 63:113-137.
- Mackie, J.L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin Books.
- McDowell, John. 1997. "Values and Secondary Qualities." In *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches*, pp. 201-213, edited by Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McShane, Katie. 2006. "Why Environmental Ethics Shouldn't Give Up on Intrinsic Value." *Environmental Ethics* 29(1):43-61.
- Miller, Peter. 1982. "Value as Richness: Toward a Value Theory for an Expanded Naturalism in Environmental Ethics." *Environmental Ethics* 4(2):101-114.
- Moore, G. E. 1993. *Principia Ethica*. Edited by Thomas Baldwin. 2nd rev. ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mulligan, Kevin. 1998. "From Appropriate Emotions to Values." *Monist*:81(81) 161-188.
- Norton, Bryan G. 1984. "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism." *Environmental Ethics* 6:131-148.
- Norton, Bryan G. 1991. *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Norton, Bryan G. 2005. *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Olson, Jonas. 2004. "Buck-Passing and the Wrong Kind of Reasons." *Philosophical Quarterly* 54:295-300.
- Prinz, Jesse J. 2004. *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rabinowicz, Wlodek, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen. 2000. "A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and For Its Own Sake." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100(1):33-51.

- Rabinowicz, Wlodek, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen. 2004. "The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-Attitudes and Value." *Ethics* 114:391-423.
- Rabinowicz, Wlodek, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen. 2006. "Buck-Passing and the Right Kind of Reasons." *Philosophical Quarterly* 56:114-120.
- Regan, Tom. 1981. "The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic." *Environmental Ethics* 3:19-34.
- Rolston, Holmes, III. 1988. *Environmental Ethics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Scanlon, T. M. 1998. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press.
- Slote, Michael. 2006. "Moral Sentimentalism and Moral Psychology." In *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, pp. 219-239, edited by David Copp. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam. 1976. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Edited by E.G. West. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics.
- Smith, Michael. 1989. "Dispositional Theories of Value I." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supp. 63:89-111.
- Sober, Elliott. 1986. "Philosophical Problems for Environmentalism." In *The Preservation of Species: The Value of Biological Diversity*, pp. 173-194, edited by Bryan G. Norton. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Reprinted in *Environmental Ethics*, Robert Elliott (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 226-247.
- Stevenson, Charles. 1997. "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms." In *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches*, pp. 71-82, edited by Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stratton-Lake, Philip. 2005. "How to Deal with Evil Demons: Comment on Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen." *Ethics* 115(4):788-798.
- Väyrynen, Pekka. 2006. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 1:295-324.
- Wiggins, David. 1997. "A Sensible Subjectivism?" In *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches*, pp. 227-244, edited by Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton. Oxford: Oxford University Press.