Ecological Ethics
and the
Human Soul

Aquinas, Whitehead,
and the Metaphysics of Value

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Introduction

This is a work in ecological ethics. For many people, the need for such an ethic has become pressing in our time, yet demonstrating this need can be a surprisingly delicate business. To be sure, one can cite an endless list of existing and looming ecological problems. Let me provide a representative, but by no means exhaustive, list. If today is a typical one on our planet, human beings will destroy 160 square miles of tropical rainforest, create 72 square miles of desert, add 78 million tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, erode 71 million tons of topsoil, and increase our population by 233,000. In the course of a year the numbers will become mind-numbing: between 26 and 30 billion tons of carbon dioxide added to the atmosphere, a total population increase of 85 million, an area of tropical rainforest the size of Michigan lost. The current rate of human-induced extinctions is estimated to be 1,000 times the background rate. This tremendous loss of other life, this simplification of the rich diversity of creation, very likely places us in the midst of one of the great extinctions that have struck our planet only two or three times since life evolved here. The rapid increase in the concentration of carbon dioxide and other “greenhouse gases” almost certainly means that the global temperature will rise over the coming decades with catastrophic effects for some of earth’s inhabitants, human and non-human alike. In addition, our use of nitrogen, especially in fertilizers, threatens to overwhelm the natural nitrogen cycle so vital to the proper growth of plants. Human modifications to the natural environment have not only changed the structure of ecosystems (for example, which plants or animals exist, or what portion of the land is “developed”) but also, perhaps more fundamentally, the very processing and
functioning of these systems. In the past fifty years, carbon, nitrogen, phosphorous, and water cycling have changed more rapidly than at any other period in recorded human history.\(^2\)

The facts and statistics are alarming—but the term “mind-numbing” may be more to the point. We hear the numbers and read the reports about the threat of some ecological problem or other, and we learn simply to filter them out and go on with our lives. After all, the issues seem too large and remote. Besides, we have more pressing problems—bills to pay, sick children, an exam to prepare for, a migraine headache, two reports due by tomorrow, and so on. Macro-scale ecological problems, and the vast majority of more regional problems, simply do not affect our lives as concretely and immediately as do our other concerns. But as we deal with those problems in our daily lives, we contribute to the macro-level problems described above. Our use of fossil fuels to power our increasingly large vehicles and houses, our longer commutes from far-flung suburbs, and our consumption of processed food grown or raised across the globe with tremendous amounts of fertilizers and pesticides all leave an ecological wake, a trail of effects, which is as complex as it is damaging.

In this work, I presuppose that ideas have efficacy; they make a difference in how we live. One complex of ideas that many of us appear to hold as a background belief (that is, without explicitly articulating it) is that human beings are separate from the rest of creation. According to this view, we have a separate destiny (whether worldly or otherworldly) from the rest of nature, which exists to serve us in our pursuit of that destiny. This view of reality rests easily with a consumerist culture in which values such as ease and gratification become the defining metaphors of “the good life.” Once we see ourselves as separate from the rest of nature, there is no need to attend to the connection between our consumption of resources and the effects of this consumption on the rest of the natural world. To be sure, it is more difficult to justify this resource use in light of the tremendous want of much of humanity. But this problem is usually answered by the argument that the living standard for all of humanity can be made richer through the further exploitation of nature. This claim reflects the “rising tide raises all boats” mentality, in which the rising tide is the flow of resources from the natural economy to the human economy.\(^3\) If nature itself, if other creatures, are understood to have moral worth—to be worthy of direct moral consideration\(^4\)—then this justification would have no merit.
A Note on Terminology

Before continuing, I want to take a moment to explicate my terminology. I use the term “instrumental value” or “instrumentally good” to designate the value or goodness of worldly creatures that consists solely in their contribution to some other worldly creatures. It is the value or goodness that creatures have as a means to other creatures’ ends. Moreover, I use the term “intrinsic value” or “intrinsic goodness” to designate the value or goodness of worldly creatures that does not consist solely in their contribution to some other worldly creatures. On the common usage, the intrinsic value of a creature entails that it is worthy of direct moral consideration by human beings. In this work, I use the term “moral worth” to mean “worthy of direct moral consideration,” and so leave open the question of whether intrinsic value entails such moral worth.

I shy away from the term “intrinsic value” or “intrinsically good” in the usual sense (that is, as entailing moral worth) because, in our conversation with Thomas Aquinas, it will be useful to employ the term “intrinsic goodness” to denote the goodness which all creatures have by the very fact that they have actuality or being. Specifically, in Thomas’ ontology, all creatures are intrinsically good in the particular sense that they are denominated good by their own intrinsic form rather than extrinsically denominated good by participation in the Form of the Good. Such intrinsic goodness does not, I will argue, entail that all creatures are worthy of direct moral consideration or that they are valuable as ends in and of themselves.

On my usage, the intrinsic goodness of a creature may, but need not, entail that this creature has moral worth. Distinguishing “intrinsic value” and “moral worth,” then, helps us to better understand Thomas’ thought. Further, as we will see, this distinction has some important implications for the current conversation in ecological ethics. This means, of course, that I am using the term “moral worth” in a different sense than it would be applied to things (human actions or characters) that might be immoral. That is, my use of “moral worth” differs from the use on which only human actions (and, by extension, human traits of character and lives as a whole) may be called “morally worthy,” because only human actions can be immoral. In contrast, I employ “moral worth” to characterize anything that practical reason or moral assessment must take into account as a moral end.
Toward an Ecological Ethic

Human behavior clearly does negatively impact other life, as evidenced, for example, by the ongoing massive simplification of the diversity of life on earth. To morally justify such destructive activity, an ethic that accords moral worth to all creatures would demand that the well-being of other creatures be weighed alongside that of humans. Though a finely developed ecological ethic would allow for differences in moral worth, it would not sanction any moral bifurcation between human beings and the rest of creation.

My primary interlocutors in this book are Thomas Aquinas and Alfred North Whitehead. Thomas holds that human beings are finally separate from nature; as a consequence, only human beings ultimately have moral worth. By contrast, Whitehead holds that all entities exist along a continuous metaphysical spectrum, so human beings cannot but be continuous with the rest of nature; on this conceptualization, all creatures have some degree of moral worth. These thinkers’ diverse metaphysics demand divergent ethics.

What makes Thomas, in particular, an intriguing, fruitful, and relevant conversation partner on the topic of ecological ethics? With some exceptions, Thomas is not usually listed among the culprits in critiques of the historical understanding of the relation between human beings and the rest of creation, even when the discussion focuses exclusively on Christian thinkers. After all, he consistently maintains that all creatures are ontologically good—that is, good in their very being. This is a far cry from a mechanistic view of creation, in which non-human creatures are understood to be mere “things” devoid of value.

Nevertheless, in the work of Thomas, we find the same moral bifurcation that exists in, say, the work of René Descartes. Frequently, what unites the work of those who morally separate human beings from the rest of creation is not so much their view of the rest of creation as their view of the human being, specifically the human soul. The work of Thomas is especially instructive because of the lucidity with which he demonstrates the centrality of a certain understanding of the human soul to the moral bifurcation in question. It is this view of the human soul that ties together at least many of those who seek to justify separating human beings from the
rest of creation. And this view, and the separation that it underwrites, are still prominent in contemporary thinking.

By demonstrating the weaknesses in Thomas’ account of this relation and offering a viable alternative, I hope to challenge the contemporary bifurcation between humans and the rest of nature. I offer an alternative understanding of human beings as a part of nature, even if the highest part. According to this understanding, all creatures are understood to have moral worth. If this vision, or something akin to it, could be articulated with sufficient force, clarity, and persuasive power to become embedded in the worldview of a significant number of people, then we could begin to change our current destructive patterns of existing in the world.

Organization of the Book

This book is divided into three parts. In Part I, I argue that Thomas’ view of the rational soul of the human being so separates humankind from the rest of creation that non-rational creatures can only be understood as instrumental to the human good. In the first chapter, I examine the metaphysical basis of creaturely goodness in Thomas’ understanding of reality. This examination concerns: first, Thomas’ explanation of the convertibility of being and goodness; and second, Thomas’ understanding of the participated goodness of creatures. The convertibility of being and goodness entails that all creatures are good insofar as they have being, actuality, or esse. However, I argue, this ontological goodness does not, in itself, entail that all creatures have moral worth or are worthy of direct moral consideration. Ontological goodness, in Thomas’ thought, is a metaphysical or metaethical matter, not an ethical one. All creatures are good insofar as they all have, to some extent, what they all desire: actuality. Creatures possess being and goodness partially or to some extent, while God possesses being and goodness universally and completely. Therefore, creatures are said to participate in being and goodness. The fact that creaturely goodness is participatory does not alter the conclusion that creaturely goodness does not entail that every creature has moral worth, though it does set the convertibility thesis within Thomas’ larger metaphysical framework.

To understand the moral import of Thomas’ ontology, it is necessary to examine his teleology. I undertake this task in the second chapter. I argue
that Thomas’ conception of the human soul is of a piece with his understanding of the telos of human beings as different in kind from the telos of non-rational creatures. Since the human soul continues in existence after the body perishes, Thomas argues, it is suited for the “final perfection” of the universe in which all motion will cease. No other “mixed bodies” (such as minerals, plants, or animals) are suited for this final perfection. Since the “first perfection,” or the completion of the world at its creation, exists for the sake of the “second or final perfection,” all non-rational creatures can only be understood as instrumental to the human good. That is, the final perfection exists for the sake of human beings, while all material creation exists for the sake of this final perfection. While embodied, human beings require non-rational creatures for survival and for revelation of the Creator. Once the animal existence of human beings has ended—once we receive our spiritual bodies—there is no need for non-rational creatures, and so their existence will cease. This discussion clarifies the distinction between ontological goodness and moral worth by demonstrating, in Thomas’ thought, that, even though all creatures have ontological goodness, only human beings have moral worth. Ultimately, non-rational creatures have only instrumental goodness; they are instrumental to the human good and lack moral worth of their own.

I next demonstrate that the moral conclusions reached by these ontological and teleological considerations are reflected in Thomas’ moral theory. Specifically, I demonstrate that his understanding of natural law and the virtues systematically excludes the possibility of according moral worth to non-rational creatures. Natural law is rational participation in the eternal law; the eternal law, as God’s providence over creation, has ordered nature such that non-rational creatures are ultimately merely instrumental to the human good. No precept of natural law, then, could possibly encourage human beings to respect the moral worth of non-rational creatures. With regard to the virtues, the relevant virtue is justice, which properly orders our relations to others. Human justice is modeled on divine justice; divine justice, in giving each creature its due, orders the lower to the higher in a strictly instrumental fashion. Therefore, direct moral consideration of non-rational creatures is positively excluded by Thomas’ understanding of justice.

In Part II, I take up the topic of Thomas’ conception of the human soul in order to demonstrate that this conception is philosophically untenable. In chapter 3, I present the problem as it presented itself to Thomas: either
the soul is a complete substance and survives the perishing of the body, or
the soul is the form of the body and so is united in existence with it. The
problem with the first position is that it threatens to shatter the unity of
the human being, while the second position threatens the immortality of
the soul. Thomas attempts to demonstrate that the soul is both subsistent
(that is, it exists in itself and so is able to survive the death of the body)
and the form of the body by maintaining that the soul is an incomplete
substance, requiring the body for its own proper operation. To lay the
groundwork for addressing Thomas’ arguments for the subsistence of
the human soul, I examine his understanding of the cognitive powers of
the human soul. One important conclusion of this discussion is that the in-
forming of the intellect by intelligible species (by which the intellect knows
universals) is an ontological, and not merely representative, matter.

In chapter 4, I turn to Thomas’ arguments for the subsistence of the
human soul, which is his primary justification for the moral bifurcation of
creation. I argue that these demonstrations suffer from the fatal flaw of in-
ferring from the representative qualities of our thoughts (the fact that we
represent the world in terms of universals, which are immaterial) to the
ontological qualities of our thoughts (the notion that the faculty by which
we know must itself be immaterial) without any suitable middle term. This
is akin to arguing that because I am thinking of the redness of my wife’s car,
my thought itself must be red. Insofar as Thomas’ conception of the human
soul is untenable, then his justification for morally separating human be-
ings from non-rational creatures collapses.

I conclude chapter 4 by sketching the argument that Thomas’ phi-
losophy ultimately is marred by his metaphysical distinction between ma-
terial and immaterial entities. If this distinction could be shown to be
viable, then the problems pointed out in chapter 3 would be resolved, be-
cause immaterial entities could only know in an immaterial fashion. How-
ever, this distinction itself depends on the success of Thomas’ arguments
for the subsistence of the human soul. Insofar as these arguments fail, the
distinction itself is untenable. Alternatively, this distinction can be under-
stood to be justified by Thomas’ arguments for God’s existence; after all,
Thomas argues for the existence of God as an immaterial entity. However,
I posit that his arguments finally fail because their success depends on his
use of analogical language to speak of God, which, in turn, depends on
the success of the arguments for God’s existence. This vicious circularity
undercuts the arguments’ effectiveness. Thomas’ metaphysical distinction
between material and immaterial entities, then, is ultimately untenable. Thus, his primary justification for morally separating human beings from the rest of creation is itself unjustified. Because the ontological bifurcation between material and immaterial entities cannot be sustained, there is no reason to agree with Thomas that non-rational creatures have only instrumental worth.

In Part III, I offer an alternative to Thomas’ metaphysics. Drawing on the thought of Alfred North Whitehead, I develop in chapter 5 the foundation for an ecological ethic that accords some degree of moral worth to all creatures. After outlining Whitehead’s metaphysics, I argue that his account of subjectivity provides a rationale for according moral worth to all creatures. According to Whitehead, subjectivity “goes all the way down,” meaning that all metaphysically fundamental entities have the capacity to experience and are, to some extent, self-creative. This capacity is the basis of moral worth. On this account, all creatures also affect the divine experience; thus, we all share the same telos, though we contribute to it according to our own capacities. As contrasted with Thomas, Whitehead rejects any bifurcation of nature; human beings and non-rational creatures are of the same generic type. All creatures are self-creative and contribute directly to the telos of the universe—the creation of beauty—and thus have intrinsic value and moral worth. This continuity between creatures, each of which enjoys subjective experience, provides a promising foundation on which to build an ecological ethic. Every creature has value in and for itself because value (and moral worth) is the subjective enjoyment of experience.

In chapter 6, I summarize some of the basic underpinnings of an ecological ethic built on neoclassical grounds. I then demonstrate the relevance of this value theory to the contemporary conversation of ecological ethics. I argue that this theory integrates the best insights of two of the leading theorists of the intrinsic value of non-human entities, environmental ethicists Holmes Rolston III and J. Baird Callicott, while avoiding the problems that plague their theories. Rolston argues that the intrinsic value of non-human creatures, including non-sentient living beings, is independent of human valuation. Callicott maintains that there can be no value without a valuer and that the intrinsic value of non-human creatures depends upon human sentiments. Both thinkers agree that valuation requires consciousness and that consciousness coincides with subjectivity. I argue that both thinkers are right where they take themselves to disagree and both wrong where they agree. That is, Rolston is right to maintain

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that the intrinsic value of non-human creatures is independent of human consciousness, and Callicott is right to hold that value requires a valuer. How is it possible to hold two positions simultaneously? By insisting that subjectivity, and thus valuation, "goes all the way down." This position challenges the agreement between these thinkers that valuation requires consciousness and that consciousness coincides with subjectivity. In Whitehead's metaphysics, valuation requires subjectivity, but subjectivity does not require consciousness. The value theory developed on the basis of this metaphysics helps to resolve a number of difficult problems of concern to today's environmental ethicists.