

Historical Environmental Values

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John O'Neill, Alan Holland, and Andrew Light usefully distinguish two ways of thinking about environmental values, namely, end-state and historical views. To value nature in an end-state way is to value it because it instantiates certain properties, such as complexity or diversity. In contrast, a historical view says that nature's value is (partly) determined by its particular history. Three contemporary defenses of a historical view need to be clarified: (1) the normatively relevant history; (2) how historical considerations are supposed to instruct environmental decision making; and (3) the relative importance of historical and end-state considerations. There are multiple reasons for including historical considerations in an account of environmental values. For example, knowledge of a natural object's history can add depth and texture to our appreciation of that object. Further, if we were blind to the relevant history, we could not adequately understand and defend environmental policy goals such as preserving the potentials of natural systems or maintaining ecological health, for these goals appear to have irreducibly historical aspects. While historical considerations are important, such considerations are insufficient to guide our normative thinking about nature and how it should be dealt with practically. But they succeed in broadening and deepening our understanding of the nature and sources of environmental value.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a recent work, John O'Neill, Alan Holland, and Andrew Light usefully distinguish two different ways of thinking about environmental values, namely, end-state and historical views.¹ By *environmental values* I mean the different ways that nature—such as particular environments, natural objects, or nature in general—might be valuable. To value nature in an end-state way is to value it because it instantiates certain properties, such as complexity or diversity. In contrast, a historical view says that nature's value is (partly) determined by its particular history. End-state and historical accounts aim to identify the underlying reasons why we ought to attribute value or meaning to nature.

After providing a brief overview of end-state perspectives, I introduce the historical view by looking at Robert Elliot's classic account of natural value. I investigate some core problems that confront both Elliot's account and a proposal from O'Neill, Holland, and Light for a modified historical view. Next, I consider a recent contribution by Holland defending the importance of history. I outline some of the respects in which these different historical views need further refinement,

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¹ See John O'Neill, Alan Holland, and Andrew Light, *Environmental Values* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 144–46.

and argue that historical considerations are important but insufficient to guide our normative thinking about nature and how it should be dealt with practically. In closing, I sketch an approach to how we might combine relevant historical and end-state considerations in our environmental decision making.

II. END-STATE VIEWS

As noted above, to value an object or state of affairs in an end-state way is to value it because it instantiates certain properties. Although an end-state view is particularly good at registering the ways in which tools and commodity-like things are valuable, other objects and states of affairs are amenable to end-state valuation. For example, valuing a landscape because it exhibits biodiversity exemplifies end-state valuation (assuming the understanding of biodiversity involves no privileging of what is native to a locale).² End-state valuation does not dictate a narrow instrumental view of nature's value. Further, valuing nature in an end-state way does not require or presuppose an anthropocentric or a nonanthropocentric perspective. Either is compatible with end-state valuation.

Although end-state views are common in the environmental ethics and policy literature, an important disadvantage of such views is their inability to recognize the normative issues at stake in cases of proposed substitution. The question of substitution arises in situations in which we might substitute an object or environment for another that has the same, or sufficiently similar, end-state properties. If there is no interesting sense in which an object or environment is valuable because it embodies a particular history, or because it is the product of processes of a certain sort, then substituting one object or environment for another becomes readily permitted. The only difficulties are practical. That is, if we can find functional substitutes for the object or environment, or for the relevant services or opportunities it provides (whether these be economic, ecological, recreational, etc.), then there may be no objection to making the substitution. The problem is that such a view is insensitive to considerations that bear on whether, and in what respects, an object or environment is valuable. Specifically, the end-state view misses the significance of origin and history for an understanding of environmental values.

² Biodiversity is a complex concept that refers to the diversity of biological entities and to the evolutionary and ecological processes that support such diversity. It is common to distinguish diversity at different levels: at the level of genes, species, populations, habitats, and ecosystems. Conceptually, biodiversity does not seem to entail the privileging of what is native to a given locale (e.g., native species). However, if it is appropriate to privilege native elements or compositions, then the concept of biodiversity has a historical dimension, for "native" is an inherently historical idea. This conceptual issue aside, concern about the possible negative effects of non-native species is common among biodiversity theorists. See, for example, Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), pp. 44–50. For helpful discussion of the concept of biodiversity, see Bryan G. Norton, *Why Preserve Natural Variety?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 31–35, 50–60; and Paul P. Wood, "Biodiversity as the Source of Biological Resources," *Environmental Values* 6 (1997): 251–68.

This inability to deal with the question of substitution is an important reason why many philosophers have followed Robert Elliot in defending a historical view of environmental value.

III. ROBERT ELLIOT'S HISTORICAL VIEW

Robert Elliot³ has provided the most elaborate philosophical defense of a historical view of natural value, where natural value refers to the value various natural objects (plants, species, ecosystems, etc.) can have.⁴ The view, in short, is that origin (genesis) and history are an important determinant of natural value. For Elliot, this means that origin and history are “value-adding,” though not necessarily valuable in their own right or in isolation.⁵ Thus, Elliot does not claim that historical considerations are the sole determinant of natural value (a point I return to below). In this section, I outline Elliot’s view and indicate its explanatory power. I turn to some important criticisms of the view in the next section.

Elliot’s classic essay, “Faking Nature” had a specific focus, namely, the pernicious character of what Elliot called “the restoration thesis” (later called “the replacement thesis”⁶). Here is the sort of case motivating Elliot’s view:

There is a proposal to mine beach sands for rutile. Large areas of dune are to be cleared of vegetation and the dunes themselves destroyed. It is agreed, by all parties concerned, that the dune area has value quite apart from a utilitarian one. It is agreed, in other words, that it would be a bad thing, considered in itself, for the dune area to be dramatically altered. Acknowledging this the mining company expresses its willingness, indeed its desire, to restore the dune area to its original condition after the minerals have been extracted. The company goes on to argue that any loss of value is merely temporary and that full value will in fact be restored. In other words they are claiming that the destruction of what has value is compensated for by the later creation (re-creation) of something of equal value. I shall call this “the restoration thesis.”⁷

Initially, we may note that there is a sense in which the restoration thesis is true: restoring the dunes in this case would provide some meaningful compensation. However, Elliot’s point is that the restored site does not have *equal* value to the site that existed prior to the mining. The problem with restoration is not that the restored dunes represent an inadequate restoration of the various elements and functions manifest at the site prior to the mining. We can grant, for the sake of argument, that the plant and animal species, abiotic elements, ecological relationships, and so on, that existed prior to the mining are restored or reinvigorated in such a way

³ Robert Elliot, “Faking Nature,” *Inquiry* 25 (1982): 81–93, and *Faking Nature: The Ethics of Environmental Restoration* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁴ I prefer to speak of “environmental value” rather than “natural value,” but I employ Elliot’s vocabulary here.

⁵ Elliot, *Faking Nature*, p. 81.

⁶ See Elliot’s revision and expansion of the 1982 article in *Faking Nature*, chap. 3.

⁷ Elliot, “Faking Nature,” p. 81.

that they can continue their development free from further human interference.⁸ The problem, according to Elliot, is that the restored site has the wrong history. Prior to the mining, the dunes landscape was paradigmatically “natural,” meaning it was the product of forces and processes “unmodified by human activity.”⁹ After the restoration, the causal continuity between the restored site and its history prior to the mining has been disrupted in a normatively relevant sense.

Elliot’s view suggests a spectrum whose poles are “pristine” natural sites at one end and “sullied” sites at the other.¹⁰ Elliot maintains that more pristine natural sites are of superior natural value compared to less pristine or restored sites. However, this claim should be taken in a qualified sense since Elliot is sensitive to other considerations that bear on our evaluation of a given site’s natural value. Such considerations include whether the site is biologically complex or diverse, rare, the last token of an ecosystem type, or a contributor to a representative range of ecosystem types. The size of the site may also be relevant.¹¹ Elliot’s historical view is founded on a property that pristine sites have—and that restored sites lack—namely, the property of being *naturally evolved*. Elliot thinks naturalness in this sense is “the key to the explanation of nature’s intrinsic value.”¹² An implication of Elliot’s view is that a restored natural site, no matter how successful as a restoration, is a substitution or replacement of something less than original for something original. For Elliot, the loss of the original entails, other things being equal, a loss in value. Thus, restoring nature is like replacing an original artwork with one that is less-than-authentic, one that is somehow a fake or forgery.¹³

For Elliot, what is special about paradigmatically natural sites (such as the unmined dunes) is that the various forms of life, ecological relationships, and so on, which are manifest at those sites, have existed without interruption. In such natural landscapes, the present states are the outcome of the prior states and humans have not had a hand in the resulting arrangement. Paradigmatically natural sites thus have a unique kind of integrity that has been produced and maintained over time. I believe one reason for regarding natural provenance as normatively significant is

⁸ This empirical assumption is, of course, utterly far-fetched given the present state of our knowledge and technology, but that is irrelevant to the argument here.

⁹ “I shall take it that ‘natural’ means something like ‘unmodified by human activity’” (Elliot, “Faking Nature,” p. 84; Elliot, *Faking Nature*, p. 82).

¹⁰ See, in particular, Elliot, *Faking Nature*, pp. 108–11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 141–42.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 59. I won’t go into the metaethical complexities here regarding the ascription of intrinsic value to nature. It is sufficient to say that, for Elliot, central to intrinsic value is the idea and practice of “valuing something for itself, for its own sake, as an end in itself” (*Faking Nature*, p. 25). I’m not convinced by Elliot’s claim that the property of being naturally evolved is the “key” to nature’s intrinsic value. But I accept Elliot’s claim that nature might be intrinsically valuable in virtue of its naturalness without it being the case that a natural state of affairs has, all things considered, positive value (for discussion, see *ibid.*, pp. 137, 142).

¹³ Elliot employs the language of pristine/sullied and original/fake, treating these more or less as interchangeable pairs. While I find the language of pristine/sullied plausible as a way of describing natural objects, the language of originality or authenticity seems inapt. This inaptness suggests one of the senses in which Elliot’s analogy between nature and art is strained.

the desirability of living in a world that does not pervasively reflect human designs and purposes.¹⁴ I regard this point as one of the deep intuitions underlying Elliot's historical view, though I won't further defend this point here.

One of the reasons a historical view such as Elliot's is important is that it can account for the feeling of regret or loss when the natural world is developed or altered in certain ways. A practical upshot of Elliot's view is that if historical considerations are persuasive, then they give us a reason to prefer, other things being equal, environmental preservation over restoration. In this respect, historical considerations can function to block, or at least raise the bar of justification for, certain proposed land uses, such as the proposed mining of the dunes in Elliot's example.¹⁵ Historical considerations indicate a source of value that, if "sullied," may never be compensated for. I say "may never" because Elliot leaves open the possibility that restored nature could have value as great as the original nature that has been modified. For example, the restored site might have some (very) valuable feature that the original site lacked.¹⁶ However, even if we maintained, as Elliot is wont to, that restored nature generally fails to restore the value of the original,¹⁷ this claim is compatible with the thought that restoration is very valuable as a natural value restoring activity. The important point, given the focus of this essay, is that Elliot's historical view sensitizes us to a type of consideration denied or not brought into view by ahistorical end-state views of landscapes and other natural objects.

IV. TOWARD A MODIFIED HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

I suspect many people share Elliot's intuitions about nature being valuable as a historical particular.¹⁸ Yet Elliot's view faces some serious criticisms. I'm interested here in a particular line of criticism articulated in the recent work of O'Neill, Holland, and Light.¹⁹ O'Neill et al. disagree with Elliot about what the normatively relevant history is and seek to abandon Elliot's focus on the value-adding property of having

¹⁴ "We value the [wild] forest and river in part because they are representative of the world outside our dominion, because their existence is independent of us" (Elliot, "Faking Nature," p. 86).

¹⁵ The same would hold true for many other cases we might imagine—e.g., removing mountaintops in Appalachia to access seams of coal, clear-cutting remnant old-growth forests in Washington and Oregon, etc.

¹⁶ For discussion, see Elliot, *Faking Nature*, pp. 80–81. This aspect of Elliot's view was anticipated in the earlier work: "Artificially transforming an utterly barren, ecologically bankrupt landscape into something richer and more subtle may be a good thing. That is a view quite compatible with the belief that replacing a rich natural environment with a rich artificial one is a bad thing" ("Faking Nature," p. 87).

¹⁷ See Elliot, *Faking Nature*, pp. 91, 145. However, Elliot appears to contradict himself at one point when he writes: "Nor does the [anti-replacement] thesis strictly imply that an area of land that has been restored cannot eventually come to have the value possessed by that area prior to its degradation" (*ibid.*, p. 108).

¹⁸ A historical particular is an object that is a particular in virtue of its particular history, not in virtue of its particular non-historical properties.

¹⁹ O'Neill et al., *Environmental Values*, pp. 125–64.

a natural provenance. I want to explore this criticism in what follows. In the next section, I consider the alternative historical view proposed by O'Neill et al.

A basic motivation for modifying Elliot's view is the thinness of the notion of history that Elliot regards as normatively significant. O'Neill et al. believe there is no good reason to restrict ourselves to the normative significance of having a natural provenance while excluding the possible significance of the life histories of humans who have lived in a given place.²⁰ "[H]istory matters," write O'Neill et al., "in the same way both in our evaluation of environments that do, and those that do not, embody human activity."²¹ It is the particular historical identity of a place that matters. In some cases, this identity may be a natural causal continuity with the past, as in Elliot's view.²² But more often the identity in question involves an intertwining of natural and human histories (indeed, often multiple human histories). O'Neill et al. agree with Elliot that historical considerations, in general, function to block proposals that would aim to replicate a particular place or to substitute one place for another. In this respect, O'Neill et al. contend that "time and history must enter our environmental valuations as constraints on our future decisions."²³ The implications of this claim for environmental decision making I take up in the next section. My present concern is O'Neill et al.'s critique of Elliot.

One problem for Elliot is that he appears to have nothing interesting to say about the value of objects or environments that are the product of both natural and human originating processes.²⁴ Yet many of the objects we might take an interest in—particularly in the non-pristine contemporary world—embody a complex intertwining of natural and human causal origins. Think of agricultural landscapes, local ponds and copses, or those unused lots that can be found in virtually any urban or suburban landscape. Of course, according to Elliot a place with a history of human habitation, or an object that is partly the product of human activity, can still embody some degree of natural value. Other things being equal, a place that has been less modified by human activity has greater natural value compared to a place that has been more modified, and likewise, with various objects, such as domesticated species of plant or animal. However, one difficulty with this response is that it seems to assume the criterion of naturalness, understood as having a natural provenance, is the (or at least *a*) crucial factor determining our judgments of natural value. But there seems to be no good reason why a historical view should place so much emphasis on the normative significance of being naturally evolved.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 140–41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 145–46.

²² See, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 146, 163, 176, 198. However, I think this aspect of environmental value is muted in the discussion, although it is more prominent in the independent work of Holland, which I discuss in section six.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 156; cf. pp. 145–46, 176.

²⁴ There is some infelicity in speaking of the "natural" and the "human" as I do here, for this might be taken to suggest that humans are not part of nature. But we need a way of marking the distinction between nonhuman and human causal origins. Hence, I follow Elliot in using "natural" to refer to nonhuman causal origins. But this usage does not imply any particular view (such as Elliot's) about the sense in which humans are, or are not, part of nature.

In addition, such an emphasis can miss or underappreciate other important sources of environmental value, historically understood.

Consider the case of *in situ* agricultural biodiversity.²⁵ *In situ* agricultural biodiversity refers to biodiversity that has been cultivated and preserved through context-specific patterns of agriculture and land use. Importantly, the maintenance of such diversity requires the preservation of the various elements and processes that are manifest in these particular land uses. This is one of the problems with *ex situ* gene banks that abstract genetic materials out of the natural and social contexts in which these materials emerged and in which they find support. Further, it is significant that, historically, indigenous and subsistence communities have often pioneered and preserved the patterns of land use that enabled agricultural biodiversity to develop and flourish. An account of environmental values that is sensitive to the value of objects like *in situ* agricultural biodiversity is thus capable of illuminating how concern for certain environmental values may dovetail with concern for justice. This is so in the sense that a proper recognition of the contributions that particular social or cultural groups make, or have made, to a valued good or state of affairs is plausibly thought of as an element of justice.²⁶

The case just presented is probably not decisive against Elliot's historical view. One could agree with Elliot that an important determinant of natural value is having a natural provenance, and yet maintain that having a natural provenance accounts for only a relatively small portion of the total natural value of a given object. Admittedly, this position cuts against the grain of what Elliot actually says.²⁷ But I see no incompatibility between (1) viewing natural provenance as explanatory with respect to part of the natural value of a given object, and (2) viewing the overall natural value of the object as explained mostly in terms of other properties, such as biological complexity, diversity, etc. However, this possibility raises a further question, namely, how might we best combine the various historical and end-state considerations that are judged normatively significant? This is a difficult question to answer. In the concluding section, I say a little more about how we might proceed in addressing this challenge.

Another consideration more clearly supports a revision, or at least an expansion, of Elliot's historical account. One potentially unappealing implication of Elliot's view of natural value is that it implies a policy of excluding human activity from

²⁵ For relevant discussion, see Juan Martinez-Alier, "The Merchandising of Biodiversity," in Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (London: Earthscan Publications, 1997), pp. 109–27; and O'Neill et al., *Environmental Values*, pp. 172, 178–79.

²⁶ Theories of justice focused on distributional issues may have difficulty accommodating issues of social/cultural recognition. But I see no reason to limit our thinking about justice to distributional issues (though such issues are undoubtedly important). In this regard, I follow theorists such as Nancy Fraser. For relevant discussion, see Nancy Fraser, "Abnormal Justice," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008): 393–422.

²⁷ Elliot gives the example of two islands that exhibit the same biological complexity. In one case the biological complexity naturally evolved; in the other, humans have intentionally created it. Of these two cases, Elliot says "[t]he value of the biological complexity in the first [case] is *much greater* than in the second, since the first exemplifies a property, namely the property of being naturally evolved, that intensifies its overall value" (*Faking Nature*, pp. 81–82, emphasis added).

landscapes whenever doing so is practically feasible and not in conflict with any overriding normative aims. This position follows from assuming that the preservation or restoration of natural value is an important aim, even if not the only or most important one.²⁸ However, critics contend, accounts of environmental value that marginalize our dependence on nature, and thereby marginalize our modifications of nature in order to meet our needs and create culture, are theoretically deficient.²⁹ Such views, critics argue, threaten to turn nature into a museum piece, and fail to see nature as a living totality of which we are a part.³⁰ Although this criticism misses the mark in certain ways,³¹ I think the critics are right to emphasize the importance of making our theorizing sensitive to the ways in which we engage nature to meet our needs and create culture. This insight partly explains the attractiveness of the narrative view, which I consider below.

While I believe Elliot's view is compelling for the reasons discussed in the previous section, the view has difficulty appreciating the significance of the human engagement with nature. Elliot either conceives of humans as beings for whom nature is a source of aesthetic delight and deontological obligations, or we are envisioned as restorationists who seek to remedy the past destruction of natural value.³² In the case of restoration, Elliot views the human intervention as inherently value-detracting with respect to natural values (specifically, the value-adding property of having a natural provenance), despite the fact that restoration aims to restore natural value.³³ Our aesthetic enjoyment of nature and our restoration activity are both important elements of the human engagement with nature, and as such dimensions of any plausible account of environmental values. But opening up our conception of environmental values in the ways suggested above allows us to see other respects in which natural (or partly natural) objects might matter to people.

²⁸ Elliot does not claim that the preservation of natural value is the only or highest good. However, Elliot does not clarify what proportion of landscapes we might aim to preserve in, or restore to, a state that exemplifies natural value. So one is left with an unclear sense of the overall picture Elliot is envisioning.

²⁹ Versions of this criticism can be found in Ramachandra Guha, "The Environmentalism of the Poor," in Guha and Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism*, pp. 16–21 and "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," in *ibid.*, pp. 92–108; and William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), pp. 69–90.

³⁰ For related sentiments and critique, see Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), pp. 17–30 (especially pp. 27–30).

³¹ It is a caricature to suggest that environmentalists in general, or environmental philosophers in particular, have historically been insensitive to humanity's use and transformation of nature to meet our needs. Indeed, in the case of the environmental movement, one could plausibly argue that historically it has been too anthropocentric in its focus, though I won't defend this claim here.

³² On the duty of restitution as a motive for restoring natural value, see Elliot, *Faking Nature*, p. 112.

³³ Elliot appears to view human intervention in nature as in general "value-detracting" with respect to natural values (see *Faking Nature*, p. 93). However, as noted at the end of section three, Elliot leaves open the possibility that modifications or restorations of nature could improve on nature's original value.

Including these types of concern makes our theorizing richer and more adequate to the phenomena and range of considerations at play.

V. THE NARRATIVE VIEW

In the previous section, I suggested some of the reasons that might motivate us to seek an alternative to Elliot's view. Here I want to elaborate on the narrative view—a modified historical account put forth in recent work by O'Neill, Holland, and Light.³⁴ They propose that we replace Elliot's focus on the preservation/restoration of naturalness with a focus on maintaining narrative significance. The central idea is that we should employ a standard of acceptable change that is grounded in a qualitative notion of degree of disruption to narrative significance.³⁵ Thus, when we are reflecting on how to deal with a given landscape, and considering reasons to do this rather than that, we should not ask (pace Elliot), "How can we best restore the natural value of the site?" Instead, we should ask, "What would make the most appropriate trajectory from what has gone before?"³⁶ Or more simply, "How can we best continue the narrative of the place?"

The focus on maintaining narrative significance is meant, as I understand it, to foreground the meaning-making and valuing activities of human beings as they relate to different objects and places—whether natural (in Elliot's paradigmatic sense) or not. According to the narrative view, our individual and cultural identities are constituted in part by our engagement with particular environments. One result of this engagement is that particular environments come to embody the labors and history of individuals and communities. For O'Neill et al. this means that

Particular places, whether 'natural' woodlands, streams and ponds, or 'urban' city streets, parks and quarries, matter to individuals because they embody the history of their lives and those of the communities to which they belong. Their disappearance involves a sense of loss of something integral to their lives.³⁷

The narrative view has several important implications for our thinking about environmental values. First, the view illuminates certain non-substitutable aspects of human well-being, which is relevant to contemporary debates about sustainability. O'Neill et al. maintain that we cannot sustain the human goods of affiliation and community without maintaining "particular environments that are constitutive of communities."³⁸ Second, in not prioritizing concern for places where humans are absent, or minimally present, the narrative view challenges the focus on wilderness, which is characteristic of views like Elliot's. The problems that accompany the

³⁴ O'Neill et al., *Environmental Values*, pp. 153–201.

³⁵ "Change can be too much or too little, not by any simple quantitative measure, but by a qualitative measure of degree of disruption to narrative significance" (*ibid.*, p. 157).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39; see also pp. 66–67, 176.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

prioritization of wilderness in certain (“new world”) environmental views simply do not arise for the narrative view. Third, the narrative view can illuminate the sense in which local histories can be an independent source of value that provides a reason to protect certain landscapes, objects, or species. This seems especially important when it comes to the issue of *motivating* environmental concern. For example, people might view their local history as one of coexisting and interacting with a certain set of objects and nonhuman species—*this* landscape, *this* stream, *these* resident species, and so on.³⁹ This local history is a distinctive source of value that provides a reason to protect the relevant objects.

I regard the narrative view as attractive for the reasons just stated but the view raises a number of questions. I’ll comment first on some issues regarding the narrative significance of how our identities are constituted by our engagement with particular places. Suppose a particular environment has in fact constituted one’s identity. Couldn’t this be so in the sense that, for example, one hates the place where one grew up and couldn’t be happier to have left it? If so, then the normative import of the descriptive point about identity constitution is underdetermined at best. Put differently, what normative conclusions you get from facts about how a person’s identity is constituted will depend on what matters to that person (or, alternatively, on some objective account of value). Further, I imagine that many people do not, as a matter of fact, understand their identities to be constituted by the particular places they are from, have lived in, or are currently living in. So if the point is a descriptive one, it seems false.⁴⁰ One could reply that there might be something there *to be felt*, such that if a particular object or environment that had (possible) narrative significance were destroyed, we can understand why this might be a significant loss—even if it isn’t actually *experienced as* a loss. It’s this latter idea that seems to me the right way to talk here. But if one takes this line, it’s no longer clear what work is being done by the claim about how our identities are constituted. Rather, the argument becomes focused on why we have reason to care about certain things, in this case particular objects or environments. Note that this is not an objection to the appeal to historical considerations as such. It is an objection to a certain way of understanding narrative considerations (namely, as being grounded in how the identities of individuals or communities are constituted).

Let me turn to a second worry regarding the import of identity for the narrative view. I have no doubt that Woody Allen’s identity is partly constituted by New York City as a physical and cultural environment. But this fact does not obviously support environmental values and may even tell against their importance. At least this would be so if the claim about the constitution of one’s identity were supposed to have some sort of priority in ethical-political deliberation. In the absence of an explicit appeal to some ecologically grounded baseline to guide us, the narrative

³⁹ I’m grateful to Robert McKim for discussion on this point.

⁴⁰ I would say it is often false for many people who live in a highly mobile society such as the United States.

account is far too permissive. Many examples could be given to illustrate this permissiveness. For instance, I'm sure defenders of industrial agriculture could provide a compelling narrative as to why the current way of growing crops should continue, despite its social and ecological shortcomings. The story might rely, for example, on the impressive productivity of industrial agriculture, and the fact that this indicates the triumph of human ingenuity and technological prowess in subduing nature so as to make human life more comfortable, secure, and so on. Were we to aim to break up industrial farms, some could argue that this would fail to do justice to various historical considerations that support a continuation of the status quo. So one question here is whether O'Neill et al. are presupposing some minimal ecological standard as a constraint on "appropriate" narratives.

I assume the answer is "yes." A number of claims made in *Environmental Values* support this answer. In a critique of the aim of restoring a natural state (pace Elliot), O'Neill et al. suggest that the notion of ecological health suffices to inform us of problematic forms of biotic impoverishment.⁴¹ The suggestion is that we don't need to appeal to something more robust and constraining, such as biological or ecological integrity, to guide our thinking about restoration.⁴² Similarly, in their critique of itemizing approaches to biodiversity, O'Neill et al. suggest (following Paul Wood⁴³) that "biodiversity should be understood as a concept that refers to the potentials of environments, and not just their state at any point of time: to maintain biodiversity is to maintain the capacity of a system to diversify rather than the actual diversity manifested at any point of time."⁴⁴ An important implication is that considerations of "scale, pace, or source" become relevant to judging acceptable

⁴¹ O'Neill et al., *Environmental Values*, p. 160.

⁴² I understand ecological health to consist in two basic properties: the counteractive capacity of natural systems of nontrivial size to withstand stress or change (sometimes glossed as "resilience"), and the capacity of such systems to provide a range of ecosystem services (nutrient cycling, soil production, etc.). Biological or ecological integrity, in contrast, refers to a condition of landscapes in which *native* species and *native* biotic assemblages (e.g., ecosystems of nontrivial size) are intact and flourishing. Given that "native" is an inherently historical idea, biological or ecological integrity has an irreducibly historical aspect. I assume O'Neill et al. understand biological or ecological integrity in something like the way just described, though the authors do not specify their meaning. Regarding how to understand ecological health, O'Neill et al. follow Aldo Leopold in defining this as "the capacity of the land for self-renewal" (ibid.). This characterization picks out one important feature of what contemporary authors understand by ecological health. For relevant discussion of the concepts of ecological health and biological or ecological integrity, see James R. Karr, "Ecological Integrity and Ecological Health are Not the Same," in Peter C. Schulze, ed., *Engineering Within Ecological Constraints* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1996), pp. 97–109 and "Health, Integrity, and Biological Assessment: The Importance of Measuring Whole Things," in David Pimental, Laura Westra, and Reed F. Noss, eds., *Ecological Integrity: Integrating Environment, Conservation, and Health* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), pp. 209–26; David J. Rapport, "Ecosystem Health: More than a Metaphor?" *Environmental Values* 4 (1995): 287–309 and "Sustainability Science: An Ecohealth Perspective," *Sustainability Science* 2 (2007): 77–84; and J. Baird Callicott, Larry B. Crowder, and Karen Mumford, "Current Normative Concepts in Conservation," *Conservation Biology* 13 (1999): 22–35.

⁴³ See Wood, "Biodiversity as the Source of Biological Resources."

⁴⁴ O'Neill et al., *Environmental Values*, p. 178.

changes in landscapes. For example, certain human-induced changes may blight or inhibit the potentials of landscapes in problematic respects.⁴⁵ In a similar vein, the authors agree with proponents of so-called strong sustainability “that there are real physical limits to the capacities of nature to deliver . . . services [such as resource provision, waste assimilation, etc.]”⁴⁶ Finally, in their concluding chapter, O’Neill et al. suggest that historical considerations are not the only ones that matter.⁴⁷ In light of these remarks, it is reasonable to think that O’Neill et al. are presupposing an ecological standard as a constraint on acceptable narratives.

But if this is the considered view of the authors, it is surprising that when certain cases are discussed⁴⁸ no explicit mention is made of maintaining ecological health and the capacities of natural systems to diversify as constraints on appropriate narratives. Further, if narrative or historical considerations are not the only ones that matter, as O’Neill et al. claim, it seems reasonable to expect that the authors would offer a proposal regarding the relative importance of maintaining, for example, ecological health versus continuing the narrative of a given place—assuming these two aims can come apart. Yet no such proposal is articulated. Moreover, O’Neill et al. leave it unclear whether it would ever be an appropriate aim to restore natural value in Elliot’s sense. The authors indicate that it would be inappropriate to have this aim in certain cases.⁴⁹ But it’s left unclear how other cases might be decided. Assuming Elliot is not proposing the restoration of natural value as the only guide for land use decisions—which would be absurd—then I don’t see why the aim of restoring natural value would in all cases be invalid. Of course, whether one agrees here will depend on how one weighs the relative importance of preserving areas that are paradigmatically natural (in Elliot’s sense), or that have other valuable properties to a great (or greater) degree (e.g., diversity, resilience, etc.) in virtue of being paradigmatically natural.

A third difficulty raised by the narrative view is that most landscapes we might consider give rise to conflicting narratives and hence conflicting possible futures. With respect to a particular site, there are often conflicting human histories, not to mention conflicts between the human histories and the natural history of the place. How should we adjudicate between conflicting views about how best to continue the narrative of a particular place? O’Neill et al. acknowledge this possibility of conflicting narratives. In fact, they consider it a virtue of their view that it illuminates such conflicts rather than obscuring or denying them as some other prominent views do.⁵⁰ One implication of the narrative view is that tragic conflicts between competing narratives of a place become a live possibility. The view can

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁴⁸ For example, the Reposaari case (see *ibid.*, pp. 160–61).

⁴⁹ Such as the Reposaari case.

⁵⁰ For example, as ahistorical itemizing approaches to biodiversity preservation do (*ibid.*, pp. 170–72), or “objective list” accounts of human well-being used to specify a conception of sustainability (*ibid.*, p. 196; cf. p. 39).

explain why a given narrative might make sense in some ways, and yet lead to tragic loss.⁵¹ I agree with O'Neill et al. that a plausible value theory should admit of plural goods. It follows that such a theory will have to face the possibility of tragic trade-offs between competing, and possibly incommensurable, goods. But we need to be clear about exactly what is being traded off. The narrative view threatens to obscure the trade-offs that might have to be made by assimilating Elliot-type historical concerns into a concern for cultural preservation.

A further problem is that the narrative view, by itself, is not inherently sensitive to the distinctive goods of various nonhuman sentient animals. I can think of local or global narratives that would be beneficial to sentient animals were these narratives acted on. But many actual and imaginable narratives are oblivious to, or outright hostile to, the goods of various sentient animals with whom we share the world. Though I won't argue for it here, I assume that all sentient animals have a normatively relevant good, and that this good is often in conflict with the good(s) of humans. Concern for sentient animals therefore complicates and enriches the account of why nature matters, for nature includes a variety of beings that experience first-personally their own natural good or its thwarting. I think concern for sentient animals should operate as another constraint on appropriate narratives.⁵²

VI. HISTORY AND THE WORTHWHILE LIVES ARGUMENT

In a recent article defending the importance of history, Alan Holland argues that history matters because there is a link between an appreciation of nature as a distinctive historical phenomenon and our capacity to live worthwhile lives.⁵³ Holland's argument could be read as an elaboration of the narrative view presented in *Environmental Values*, but it actually departs from that view in some important respects. In this section, I explore the significance of Holland's contribution with respect to the question of the importance of history.

According to Holland, living a worthwhile life means living a life of meaning. A life of meaning is one that is appreciative of, and constituted by, meaningful relationships. As Holland puts it: "The living of worthwhile lives requires that we

⁵¹ For example, imagine a narrative that gives expression to a community's identity but which has as a consequence the destruction of a rare and beautiful natural habitat, or the destruction of the species living in a particular place.

⁵² O'Neill et al. discuss the moral status of nonhuman animals at various points (e.g., see *Environmental Values*, pp. 91–100, 106–11). But their view remains elusive. For example, the authors say at one point that "the very notion of moral consideration itself looks too thin to ground the very different type of response that is owed to different kinds of beings" (*ibid.*, p. 107). The implication seems to be that an impersonal reason that says sentient animals are owed moral consideration does not do much work. Later, the authors suggest that "sentient beings demand from us a particular set of relations of benevolence that non-sentient beings cannot evoke—one cannot be cruel or kind to a carrot" (*ibid.*, p. 109). I agree with the point. But if this is the authors' view, it would seem plausible to think that moral concern for animals should somehow constrain appropriate narratives.

⁵³ See Alan Holland, "Why It Is Important to Take Account of History," *Ethics, Policy and Environment* 14, no. 3 (2011): 377–92.

are alive to the presence in [the] world of a sufficiency of meaning and of meaningful relationships.”⁵⁴ On Holland’s account, meaning abounds in the natural world and this meaning would be missed if we lacked an appropriate sense of history. Holland writes:

Natural, in the sense of biospherical, relationships are a paradigm of meaningful relationships both on account of the (past) history invested in them and on account of the (future) history that they foreshadow. They encompass, for example, all those biotic relations that make evolution, speciation and biodiversity possible—the predator-prey relation, parasitism, symbiosis, mutualism, mimicry and a host more. It is for this reason that destruction of the natural world carries with it so much more than the destruction of our means of subsistence. Among the collateral damage is the destruction of meaning.⁵⁵

These remarks elaborate an idea touched on in *Environmental Values* and mentioned above, namely, that we should be concerned about preserving the diverse potentials of landscapes. If it is the case that the only or best way to preserve the relevant potentials is by appreciating and preserving the natural histories of landscapes, then this is a mark in favor of historical considerations.

There is a notable connection between this line of thought and the goal of preserving ecological health—a goal that is of unquestionable importance for environmental policy. Recall how ecological health was characterized above (note 42): the counteractive capacity of natural systems of nontrivial size to withstand stress or change (sometimes glossed as “resilience”), and the capacity of such systems to provide a range of ecosystem services (nutrient cycling, etc.). Though ultimately an empirical question, it would seem highly unlikely that we could maintain the resilience of natural systems (of nontrivial size), with their accompanying functions and services, without also preserving the natural histories of these systems.⁵⁶ It is for this reason that it would be a mistake to regard the preservation of ecological health as a purely end-state value. The point would have even more force if our goal were to preserve biological or ecological integrity, for the concept of integrity refers, in part, to the presence of certain native elements. *Native* is an inherently historical idea. Further, if it is necessary, as some theorists suggest, to preserve parts of the world that have their integrity intact in order to adequately maintain (or restore) areas that manifest health,⁵⁷ then historical considerations have a very important role to play in instructing environmental policy. This argument for ecological health—which is really about maintaining the resilience and good functioning of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

⁵⁶ This claim raises further questions: should we preserve instances of all major ecosystems (of nontrivial size), or perhaps just a representative range of ecosystem types? How much ecological health can be justifiably compromised, and to what extent, in pursuit of other aims (e.g., meeting human needs, etc.)? I cannot address these questions here.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Karr, “Ecological Integrity and Ecological Health are Not the Same,” p. 101, and “Health, Integrity, and Biological Assessment,” pp. 212, 215.

natural (or partly natural) systems—is independent of Holland’s worthwhile lives argument, and hence does not depend on the plausibility of the latter.

There is another strand of the worthwhile lives argument that merits discussion. I have noted that, for Holland, living a worthwhile life entails being alive to the presence in the world of meaningful relationships. It involves appreciating not only cultural history, but also evolutionary and ecological history.⁵⁸ The idea here echoes a refrain from *Environmental Values*, namely, that we make sense of our lives, in part, by placing them in a larger narrative context. This context refers to that of natural environments and of natural history. Here is a representative passage from O’Neill et al.:

We make sense of our lives by placing them in a larger narrative context, of what happens before us and what comes after. Environments matter because they embody that larger context. This is clearest in the cultural landscapes that surround us that specifically embody the lives of individuals and communities. However, . . . this is true also . . . with respect to natural processes. Unintentional natural processes provide part of the context in which intentional human activities take place and through which we understand their value.⁵⁹

As a descriptive claim, I think it is false to say that most people do in fact “make sense” of their lives by situating them in a larger narrative context. But I take O’Neill et al. to be saying that we *should* do so. The failure to do so cuts us off from sources of meaning and understanding that are somehow vital.

Unfortunately, neither O’Neill et al. nor Holland elaborate much on the claim that we can only make sense of our lives by situating them in the broader context of nature’s narrative. By way of support for this claim here are a few considerations that I think are relevant. One thing that seems special and distinctive about the natural world as a historical particular—as distinct from, say, the galaxy or the universe as historical particulars—is that we have a deep connection to the natural world. We owe our genesis to it and we continue to be a part of it, even as we modify and sometimes destroy it. Importantly, given our genesis there is continuity between humans and other natural beings that are also part of the natural world. This is so even if this continuity is often ignored, downplayed, or viewed as a source of unease. Despite the fact that the natural world is in certain respects radically “other” to the human—which makes it a source of wonder, awe, terror, and more—it nonetheless provides part of the context within which human life, as a distinctive form of life, makes sense. That is, human life is part of a larger story, a story we did not create but came in on and can at best influence. Reflection on this fact supports a certain humility, understood here as entailing the belief that we are not the most important beings on the planet. Further support for humility

⁵⁸ Holland, “Why It Is Important to Take Account of History,” p. 387.

⁵⁹ O’Neill et al., *Environmental Values*, p. 198; cf. pp. 162, 164.

is provided by the observation that natural history appears to be without purpose or goal, and it may have a future that is recalcitrant to human ends, not to mention the ends of many other currently living species. No doubt this is one reason why it is deeply challenging to contemplate natural history and its possible future(s).

For Holland, at stake in thinking about these matters is meaning and understanding, not necessarily the discernment of value. Indeed, the sober reckoning of the various untoward aspects of the natural world and its history — notably, its countless “protracted tortures” and “hideous deaths”⁶⁰ which Holland rightly finds disquieting — may call into question the view that nature exhibits, on balance, more value over disvalue.⁶¹ In contrast, Holland suggests that meaning, and the desire for understanding that motivates the search for it, survives the recognition that nature may not be a repository of value, all things considered. In any case, nature need not be regarded as such to support the worthwhile lives argument.

I think Holland is right to observe that we can find meaning in things or events that are terrible, awful, or of questionable value. Thus, the recognition that the natural world is a profoundly meaningful historical phenomenon does not depend on the claim that the natural world exhibits a sufficiency, much less a preponderance, of value (a claim Holland finds dubious⁶²). The point is that if nature is meaningful, this recognition could support a robust commitment to the natural world. Perhaps this commitment would prove even more resilient faced with nature’s complexity and untoward aspects, compared to a commitment that is founded on a claim about nature’s value.

However, it is not obvious to me that meaning can survive where value is entirely absent. In making his case, Holland offers a vivid example to motivate his view: “[I]t strikes me as a very strange sensitivity indeed that can gaze into a nest of fledglings that has recently been frozen or starved to death because the parent has met with some accident, and discern value.”⁶³ In contrast, “meaning survives the gaze into the lifeless nest.”⁶⁴ Which is to say, the concept of meaning “is capable of carrying our commitment to the natural world far further, and deeper, than the concept of value ever can. For even the bitterest meaning is a potential source of understanding, our quest for which explains our interest in meaning.”⁶⁵ But what exactly is the understanding we gain when we gaze into lifeless nest? Holland does not say. Perhaps the relevant understanding is insight into the extreme contingency and fragility of the lives and goods of living beings. Or maybe it is the idea that

⁶⁰ John Stuart Mill, “Nature,” In *Three Essays on Religion* (London: Longmans, 1874), pp. 28–29.

⁶¹ This might be so even if we limited ourselves to consideration of the thwarted and often conflicting flourishings of sentient beings, which we might confidently regard as having a normatively relevant flourishing.

⁶² Holland, “Why It is Important to Take Account of History,” pp. 382–83. I see no reason for thinking that the worthwhile lives argument would be weakened or undermined were we to judge that nature did in fact exhibit great value, all things considered.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

awe or wonder (or something along these lines) is an appropriate response to those beings and species that do survive, and even thrive, given the order of things natural and the rule of chance, accident, and disaster.⁶⁶

One difficulty with this line of reasoning is that it does not clearly support the view that nature should be preserved as it is, given its particular history and potentials. For example, imagine some mega-pest that is awe-inspiring, according to the foregoing argument, but a decided menace to some highly valued beings (say, sentient beings) or natural system. Presumably, we could have good reasons to try to thwart or even eradicate the pest.⁶⁷ Further, it is not clear in what sense the meaningfulness of the gaze into the lifeless nest (which we can grant for the sake of argument) supports the view that we should preserve the set of relations that eventuate in situations such as this. In response, one might fall back on the argument about preserving the potentials of environments. I do believe the preserving-the-potentials argument provides a plausible basis for constraining the type and extent of our modifications of the natural world. Moreover, this argument fits well with Holland's claim about the upshot of his view for environmental policy. "[T]he prime objective of environmental policy making," writes Holland, "could be [*should be?*] re-described as 'the maintaining of environments.'"⁶⁸ On this view, "the destruction of the environment"—understood to mean "the destruction or impairment of meaningful relations [which have an irreducibly historical character]"⁶⁹—is the bad to be avoided.

VII. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

What Elliot, O'Neill et al., and Holland (in his independent work) help us to see is the importance of certain historical considerations for our normative thinking about nature. Knowledge of a natural (or partly natural) object's history can add depth and texture to our appreciation of that object. Historical considerations can also illuminate the way in which certain objects or environments may be valuable because they are partly constitutive of individual or cultural identities. Further, if we were blind to the relevant history it would be difficult to understand and defend environmental policy goals such as preserving the potentials of natural systems or

⁶⁶ This type of argument reflects one made by Mark Sagoff: "It is the enormous and timeless labor of evolution that invests its products—the plants and animals we encounter—with a dignity and meaning. Their legitimacy is based not in any purpose they may serve—ours or that of some superorganism that contains them—but in the circumstances of their coming hither. They survive to tell the story of random mutation and natural selection, of chance and matter, which turns out to be more magnificent and harrowing than anything any one of us could imagine." See Mark Sagoff, "The Value of Integrity," in Laura Westra and John Lemons, eds., *Perspectives on Ecological Integrity* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), p. 173.

⁶⁷ Of course, we sometimes misjudge what counts as a "pest," but such misjudgment does not affect the point I'm making here.

⁶⁸ Holland, "Why It is Important to Take Account of History," p. 390.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

maintaining ecological health, since these goals appear to have irreducibly historical aspects.⁷⁰ Moreover, in the absence of historical sensitivity a distinctive type of justice (or injustice) may be missed, as in the *in situ* agricultural biodiversity example discussed above. Lastly, understanding human life as part of a larger story—the narrative of nature—emphasizes our continuities with other species, opens us to the “otherness” of nature, and supports humility. For these reasons, I believe historical considerations are important and merit a place in a refined account of environmental values.

However, beyond this general claim it seems to me difficult to state precisely the significance of historical considerations. Let me return here to the question raised earlier concerning how we might best combine the various historical and end-state considerations judged to be normatively significant. I want to say something about this, though it is beyond the scope of this essay to offer an account of how all the relevant considerations might best be combined. My remarks are therefore sketchy and provisional.

One way to proceed in thinking about these matters is to focus on preserving or restoring (partly) natural systems that have properties with clear normative significance, for example, diverse potentials, resilience, and the capacity to provide a range of ecosystem services. Importantly, the value of these properties can be endorsed by a number of different normative views (e.g., anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric, consequentialist and non-consequentialist). Insofar as historical considerations inform the argument about preserving the diverse potentials of natural systems, their resilience, and so on, then such considerations are very important. And there is no reason to reduce this argument to one about preserving the conditions of existence for human beings only. Such a reduction would be implausible in any case, both epistemologically and empirically, since we cannot neatly separate the conditions of existence for human beings from those for the rest of nature.

From a basis of agreement about the value of the properties mentioned in the previous paragraph, we could turn to the more controversial questions of environmental value, such as the relative importance of having a natural provenance or narrative significance. It seems plausible to begin by highlighting those situations in which end-state and historical views are mutually reinforcing. If taking these two views seriously issued in the same decisions about what to do, our confidence about the correctness of those decisions would be supported. Further, with regard to end-state properties of clear significance (biodiversity, etc.), we could say that these properties have extra value when they have the right history. I think this is basically what Elliot believes. However, this way of thinking about the significance of history seems to make less sense on the narrative account.

There are obviously considerable challenges in reaching philosophical and public

⁷⁰ I think the same point applies to other environmental goals, such as efforts to preserve species or to assist the recovery of wildlife, but I don't elaborate on these goals here.

agreement about these matters. I think we can confidently say that historical considerations do not exhaust those that are relevant to our thinking about environmental values. Indeed, it seems to me seriously mistaken to think that historical considerations alone could suffice to guide our normative thinking about nature and how it should be dealt with practically. But I believe the defenders of historical views succeed in broadening and deepening our understanding of the nature and sources of environmental value.

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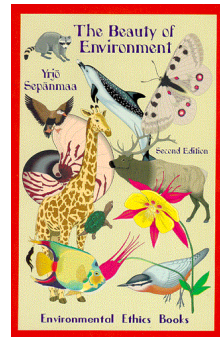


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