

Spring 5-15-2023

Our Moral Relationship to Nature

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Our Moral Relationship to Nature

Benjamin Simpson

Senior Thesis

Directed by Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza

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I. Introduction	3
II. Conceptual Clarifications	4
a) What is Nature?	
b) Values	
c) Are Humans Natural?	
III. Stewardship vs. Survival	10
a) Christianity at its Roots	
b) Neoliberalism and Longtermism	
▪ Neo-Liberal Perils	
▪ Longertermist Perils	
IV. Society Shaping Ethics	20
a) Capitalism- Divide and Conquer	
V. Responsibility	28
a) Actions and Consequences	
b) Levels of Obligation	
VI. Practical Applications	33
a) How Does This Affect the Real World?	
VII. Conclusion	40
References	42

I. Introduction

In this paper I will explore the question of whether or not humans, as natural beings, are morally responsible for their actions in relation to nature. After all most natural beings, i.e. deer, wolves, whales, or even plants, regardless of their level of intelligence, are held responsible for their effect on the environment. When a rabbit population explodes and an ecosystem is sent into turmoil, we do not morally find fault with the rabbits. With this in mind I ask: why is it so different when humans send an ecosystem into distress? What is our moral relationship to nature? To answer this question we will examine first, in section two, the major ethical starting points of the 'relational field,' a stance developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess that, in important ways, stems from Buddhism. In section three, this will be contrasted with prevalent views espoused in the West, specifically Christianity, neoliberalism, and longtermism. Capitalism and its troublesome environmental and existential impact is examined next in section four. Then, section five offers a critique of these explores the social, ecological, and ethical consequences of where such stances lead us. Finally, section six, briefly explores some practical options before summing key ideas in the conclusion.

II. Conceptual Clarifications

Before digging too far into the discussion on whether or not humans, as natural beings, are morally responsible for the way their actions affect the environment, the question of whether or not humans are natural should be addressed along with a clarification on the nature and values.

a) What is Nature

A brief definition of nature that is prolific in western thought is Aristotle's account, which he lays it out as, "an inner principle of change and being at rest" (Bodnar, 2006). This is to say that when explaining the factors that determine why and whether a thing is changing or at rest, the nature of the entity is sufficient on its own to explain this. This is because, "natures - beside the active and passive potentials- are the ultimate grounds in causal explanations" according to Aristotle (Bodnar, 2006). This definition is for the natures of all things, not just the concept of trees, mountains, and animals that is commonly conceived of and poorly defined. Below, other conceptions of what nature is will be discussed along with their constituent philosophies, but if nature is referenced in the context of being outside of that philosophy, it will refer back to this definition.

b) Values

The types of values that are discussed throughout this paper are generally intrinsic values and extrinsic values. Intrinsic values are defined most commonly as, “value that something has ‘itself,’ or ‘for its own sake,’ or ‘in its own right’” (Zimmerman and Bradley, 2002). In other words, it is something that, if asked why it is good or valued, it would create a causal train of questions that would lead one to realize that there is no dependence upon which value can be derived from other than the goodness of the thing itself. Zimmerman and Bradley continue, “that which is intrinsically good is nonderivatively good; it is good for its own sake” (Zimmerman, and Bradley, 2002). This contrasts with extrinsic value which derives its value from some related good. Extrinsic value is placed upon something by an external source for as long as that thing has some link to the external good that it is connected to. An example of intrinsic value would be the enjoyment of a well played game. The value there cannot be derived from anything other than the enjoyment of the game itself and any attempt to externalize the value of that experience would lead down an infinite trail of asking why. An example of external value would be hanging out with someone in order to get free meals. The value of hanging out with that person is dependant on the external action of receiving free food. External values can give rise to points of view that consider things as instruments or tools for use. When a thing is considered to have extrinsic value it only derives value from the end it achieves that seems to hold intrinsic or nonderivative value. This means that it becomes a tool for the means of achieving the ultimately good end. This reduces the thing from an independently valuable and existent self to merely a means. Under this way of thinking, its value is deemed lesser than that of something that is intrinsically valuable because it the thing itself holds no value on its own.

c) Are Humans natural – Ecosophy and the relational field

Ecosophist Arne Naess, who initiated the deep ecology movement, argues for a view of nature that he describes as a “relation field.” In this ecological philosophy each individual thing has greater quality than its own intrinsic values. This external quality is not a relative quality. Relativity would imply that its qualities are dependent upon some outside observer. Typically, measurable qualities are considered objective and true whereas qualities such as smell and color are understood as subjective. This view makes those non-quantifiable qualities relative, and therefore subjective, to the observer. The external quality Naess is arguing for is relational. The difference is in the nuance of the theory of relativity. Naess states, “if we take characteristics like ‘oblong’ and ‘square’, for example, they cannot objectively be qualities of a table, as the quality cannot be separated from the concepts of time and velocity in the theory of relativity. The mentioned characteristics are not subjective, but, like smell, *bound in an interdependent relationship* to our conception of the world... we arrive, not at the things themselves, but networks of fields of relations in which things participate and from which they cannot be isolated.” (Naess 1989, p.49) Relationality means that qualities can only derive value from their relation to other interdependent and relational objects and qualities (a notion that Naess derived from the Buddhist concept of interdependence or conditioned co-arising). It is, in essence, an argument against abstraction and isolation.

Naess criticizes the efforts of western philosophy to abstract and isolate nature into ‘objective’ mathematical truths. Qualities have been broken up into primary and secondary by empiricist philosophers. Primary qualities reference the measurable geometric and mechanical while secondary ones reference the physical and psychological qualities of objects. The

secondary qualities have been relegated by empiricism to a subjective nominal role which was not ‘really out there.’ These qualities were placed within the observer—,Immanuel Kant’s metaphysics saw ‘primary qualities’ as transcendental “noumena” or ‘things-in-themselves’ that could only be experienced subjectively as phenomena, thereby bringing all experientiable qualities under one roof (granted, his stance was far more nuanced). By stating that certain qualities lie not in physical objects themselves, but rather placing them in the transcendental subjective experiences of an observer, it is easy to arrive to the logic that *all* qualities are projected upon true objects. Kant argues that we cannot know a thing in itself. By this he means that the ultimate nature of what any entity or thing is, is beyond our knowledge, and hence we should simply not state anything about it; we are limited to the phenomena or things as they appear to us. Once any aspect of the reality of qualities come into question, they all must. Why should the length of an object be objective when the color or smell is not? In this way, “we arrive at ‘the thing itself’ as an *x* about which nothing can be said, while everything is ascribed to a subject who ‘creates’ the world as it is actually experienced.” (Naess 1989, p.53) This is the result of abstracting nature from its reality. Viewing the world through one’s own perspective alone seems both egotistical and fantastical as Naess points out: “the paradoxical assumption that nature is actually without colours, tones, or odours exists because we have confused our abstractions with concrete realities.” (Naess1989, p.54) The various qualities of nature are not relative to an individual. Nature is real and our perceptions are in a relationship to that reality. Just as all things are in relationship with each other.

Clearly it is not an acceptable consequence to arrive at the conclusion that anything external to us has no actual qualities. A rock does not lose the quality of hardness simply because the person observing it turns their back. Beyond the absurdity of such claims, however, there are

more disastrous consequences of this view (which actually misinterprets Kant's stance into a conflation with Berkeley's phenomenalism). Since humans project the qualities they observe onto true (natural) objects, they place themselves both externally and superior to nature. This, in turn, strongly affects the answer to our query.

The solution to this problem of abstraction is to understand qualities as being a part of of each object relationally. Naess expresses this idea as a field, "Things of the order 'material things' are conceived of as junctions within the field. The same things appear differently to us, with dissimilar qualities at various times, but they are nonetheless the same things." In other words, we each perceive reality slightly differently due to the fact that we are different and distinct despite our similarities. This does not describe a lack of perceivable objective reality but instead a way by which we all understand the world in relation to certain aspects of reality. The consequences of this are that all qualities, including secondary ones, are qualities of matter itself and that two differing statements about the same thing are not contradictory. A chair seen from two different angles by two different people is not two different chairs despite its containing two different visual qualities. To illustrate the point Naess uses an example of sticking a cold hand and a warm hand into water. To the cold hand the water is warm and to the warm hand the same water is cold. The water possesses both the qualities of warm and cold yet these are not in contradiction. By using the relational field Naess suggests a linguistic and semantic change from 'statements about the thing' to statements of relationality. He offers instead that in Ecosophy T (a stand in for any possible ecosophy used for the clarity of the following logical statement) , "statements like 'thing A is B' are abandoned in favour of 'thing A is B in relation to C'..." (Naess 1989, p.55)

Primary and secondary qualities are reunited within this theory as well. In the example with the two hands with different water temperature the hands are instruments of measurement. They are similar to the thermometer in this instance with the difference being only that they have differing starting points to measure from. Using thermometers with degrees marked out would give you a measurement, and therefore a quality, of the water's heat that is consistent across multiple thermometers. The consistency of a quality does not make it any truer of a given quality. By placing the two differently heated hands in the water and also a marked thermometer the water has the three different qualities of being cold, warm, and at a certain temperature in relation to each of those 'instruments' of measurement. Non-standardized measurement is nonetheless measurement. With this understanding primary and secondary qualities cannot be separated. The consequences of this philosophical view of nature is that not only are humans completely integrated and a relational part of nature, but that no one part of nature or reality as a whole can be truly isolated. In terms of morality this means that humans cannot anthropocentrize or prioritize themselves as a separate part of nature. Any action that humans take that harms nature as a whole will in some way also harm humans. Nonetheless, certain hegemonic views, such as Christianity, neo-liberalism, and longermism have other ideas that come with questionable premises and worrisome consequences.

III. Stewardship vs. Survival

Christianity offers different views of the human/nature relationship. One of the most influential and populated groups in the world, Christians have certain definite views on what nature is and how humans relate to it. These views can be pulled directly from the Old Testament and, regardless of interpretation, have strong effects - on the subsequent moral philosophies that develop from it. Neoliberalism is the prevailing philosophy underlying capitalist societies. It promotes the acquisition and production of capital as a moral good. This, in turn, creates a drastically different relationship between us and nature. Longtermism is a more recently popularized view point. It combines utilitarian ethics with a serious moral regard for future humans. This view is complicated and has tricky consequences which can be hard to predict due to the extended timeline that it works around. Each of these philosophies represent a significant portion of beliefs that are common around the world and should be examined closely to determine the logical outcomes that they produce.

a. Christianity at its roots

Christian philosophy on man and his relationship to nature is a somewhat hierarchical structure. According to the bible, the earth and all its constituent parts were created then gifted, in a sense, to humanity. In Genesis God states to the humans, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen. 1:28 ESV) This provides a

definitive trajectory for humanity according to Christianity. The clear objective here is to multiply, subdue the earth and have dominion over living things. With this goal in mind, the priority for moral consideration falls first upon humanity to and for itself, then living things so far as they can support humanity, and finally the earth itself which is morally considerable so long as it does not impinge upon the fulfillment of the other two goals. From here, though, interpretation comes into play and complicates things.

As the bible became printed into more and more languages the meaning of words changed ever so slightly. Two millennia later those changes tend to throw a wrench in argumentation and philisopic understanding of the source material. One of these translated words that has caused some debate is 'subdue' from the quotation from Genesis. Literalists use the Bible's use of this word to justify philosophies that encourage human superiority and the absolute control of nature. Scholars of ancient Hebrew such as Benner have a more nuanced understanding. The original word that subdue is replacing in the English translation is *kavash*. This means to step on the neck of or subjugate, hence the translation to subdue, however, is also synonymous with *radah*. *Radah* means to have dominion which is normally associated with a similar definition to subdue or control. In ancient Hebrew, though, dominion shares meaning with words such as descend, go down, and wander or spread. This interpretation of dominion is more along the lines of governing by becoming equal with ones subjects. This would mean that in Genesis God is telling humanity to be fruitful, tend to the earth, and rule its life as equals among it. Jeff Benner writes, "The use of the two Hebrew verbs *radah* and *kavask* imply that man is to rule over the animals as his subjects, not as a dictator, but a benevolent leader. Man is also to walk among and have a relationship with his subjects so that they can provide for man and that

man can ‘learn’ from them.” (Benner, 2010) The two different interpretations lead to very different conclusions and moral philosophies regarding human ecological management.

When operating under the assumption of human superiority and the modern understanding of having dominion over the earth anthropocentrism becomes the status quo. Anthropocentrism is a philosophical stance that asserts that humans are the most central or significant things in existence. This means, in ethical terms, that humans hold moral priority above all else and that fulfilling their needs and continued existence is equated with the good. This view of humans being both most important and in control justifies many modern western ideas such as capitalism, neo-liberalism, and longtermism, all of which I will discuss later in greater depth. In short, however, it endorses behaviours which can be degrading towards nature and non-human living things because their needs and goals are secondary to humans’. Additionally, it does not encourage sympathy with non-human life or ecosystems’ as a whole because it places them in subordination to humans—like a boss/employee relationship.

When operating under the assumption of human superiority and the ancient understanding of having dominion over the earth, a more complex relationship between humanity and nature develops. In a sense, this understanding still promotes anthropocentrism. Humans are still in a position of power and control over nature, yet they are also responsible for it. They are meant to walk among it, as the ancient translation suggests, and therefore learn and better tend to nature as a whole. This, in turn, is reflected back upon humanity in the form of recurring resources and habitable land. Saint John Paul II said, “Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given to him, but man too is God’s gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed.” (usccb.org, Centesimus Annus) This way of understanding God’s

directive for humanity leads to a moral system in which human prosperity is the goal but it can only be achieved through mutual moral consideration of all the parts which make up this world. A level of interrelationality and interaction between humans and nature not only exists, but is vital to the mutual flourishing of each party. This way of interpreting the Christian relation of humans to nature works well with Arne Naess's relational field. Naess takes several quotations from the bible to emphasize the responsibility that humans have to the natural world they have been gifted. He states, "It seems presumed that humans beings are to fill the Earth, but not by squeezing out other creatures He created... God blesses all equally: *each thing is blessed separately and referred to as good.*" (Naees 1985, p. 185) Humans, then, should consider in all their actions whether or not what they choose to do will harm the good things that God has made and given them. If not for the sake of the mutually beneficial relationship that exists between humans and nature, then for God who gave dominion to humans in the hope that all his creation would flourish.

b. Neoliberalism and Longtermism

In stark contrast to the philosophies of the relational field and Christianity, Neoliberalism and longtermism are philosophies which promote nature as a resource first. Both of these philosophies begin with a basic understanding of nature as something which supports humanity as a means for its growth and potential strength which is likely a result of their post-capitalism genesis and subsequent rise in popularity. Longtermism seeks, at its most basic, to protect the lives and prospects of all future humans; and in most popular iterations this is achieved by means

of abusing nature. Neoliberalism, on the other hand, starts with the understanding that all people are consumers and that ethical consideration should stem from a things ability to support markets and improve the lives of consumers.

i. Neoliberal Perils

Neoliberalism is a social philosophy that promotes economic and ethical practices which treat its participants as consumers. It encourages open market capitalism and discourages any attempts at equality. Neoliberalism works by assuming that the power of each individual is in their purchasing capacity and ability to be productive. By opening the market, and therefore a social hierarchy system, the idea is that the best products and producers will rise and the will of the people will be revealed through monetary means. George Monbiot writes in regard to the fundamental points of neoliberalism, “Inequality is recast as virtuous: a reward for utility and a generator of wealth, which trickles down to enrich everyone. Efforts to create a more equal society are both counterproductive and morally corrosive. The market ensures that everyone gets what they deserve.” (2016)

Monbiot takes a strong stance against neoliberalism, but does deliver an insightful view when this philosophy is taken to its logical consequences. Artificial equalization takes away power in the form of money away from those who have earned it and gives it to those who have not. For example through taxation and welfare services take percentages of peoples income, pool that money, then redistribute it to various people and programs in an attempt to improve the most lives possible. To neoliberalists those actions go against the basic nature of capitalism and

creates new inequities by taking from those who have earned their capital and giving it to those who have not. This also interferes with the notion of ‘the power of purchase.’ By this I mean the idea, within neo-liberalism, that each individual has the opportunity to express their various needs and desires through their purchase history. The more people that purchase a given item, the more money the producers will make and they will then be able to make more of it. This concept also applies to social dynamics.

In 2016 Colin Kaepernick refused to stand for the national anthem at his football games. Nike decided to back him and use his image and message in their advertisement campaigns. Initially their stock dropped by 3%, but as people began buying Nike products to support their political and social views, their stock rose higher than it had ever previously been. People express themselves through their purchases in a heavily capitalist society and, according to the neoliberal philosophy, this is hampered by any attempt at redistributing wealth. By taking the purchasing power away from those who have earned it, they alter what the market’s true expressions should be. On the other hand, by not redistributing wealth the market could unreasonably tip to reflect only what the wealthy few want, and not what is best for the majority of people. This philosophy is pervasive in the modern economic climate and can be harmful to not only the masses but also to the idea of nature.

At the root of neoliberalism is a need to view everything fundamentally as a resource. This view reduces everything from its own intrinsic value into a potentially abusable resource whose value is dependent only on the potential abuse it can be put through so as to deliver monetary value. Historical ideas of what nature is, then, are destroyed and come to mean anything which has not yet been made into a product. The consequences of this are a lack of moral regard for anything natural as valuable in itself and a constant drive to change nature into

an exploitable product. This leads to a value system in which only the quantifiable substance of things are valued and not their relational qualities. Neoliberalism also, by definition, endorses an anthropocentric view of moral consideration. Since humans are currently the only beings that can engage in Neoliberalism and capitalism, they inherently have a greater value within the system. Human considerations, then, are more important than all others. This can allow for behaviors that are abusive or less considerate towards non-human interests.

ii. Longermist Perils

Longtermism is an ethical philosophy centered around the belief that future humans deserve our moral considerations. That is to say: future humans moral interests should be a part of current living humans' moral deliberations and calculations. William MacAskill writes that, "Longtermism is the view that positively influencing the long-term future is a key moral priority of our time" (MacAskill, 2022) People who are not yet born, according to MacAskill, should have the same moral value as those who are alive today. Longtermism takes issues like climate change very seriously due to its slow and insidious nature. They consider it to be one of the more concerning issues to focus on since it increasingly affects future generations the more it goes unchecked. MacAskill also points out that longtermism does not put a precedence on future humans over currently existing ones but instead considers them as equally significant morally speaking. This long-term thinking is nothing particularly new since humans have been morally justifying actions as being for the good of future generations for centuries. Longtermism extends this method of thinking, however, and considers the theorized potential of 10^{54} future humans

who could be born. By expanding the scope of this view the individual human becomes less important and the greater whole of civilization becomes the focus. The larger the scope of long-term morality, the less the individual and current person matter. This is a problem that Emile Torres considers to be deal breaking.

In regard to the question of why he considers longtermism to be dangerous Torres states, “the short answer is that elevating the fulfilment of humanities supposed potential above all else could nontrivially increase the probability that actual people- those alive today and in the near future- suffer extreme harms, even death.” (2021) Torres is justified in his worry. The grand ideal of preserving humanity’s future holds a moral weight of cosmic proportion— literally! It is similar to how, historically, appeals to a better future for humanity have been used to justify war, genocide, and disenfranchisement. This also, in part, is a result of longtermism’s roots in utilitarianism. By the measure of whose greatest intrinsic value, the potential future generations morally outweigh current living ones.

This has divided longtermism into roughly three groups: transhumanists, utilitarians, and what I call “simulationists.” These groups are not mutually exclusive: some longtermists encourage interweaving their various methods to ensure the greatest possible potential for humanity. Hence:

- a) transhumanists believe that the way to preserve civilization for future humans is to become posthuman or more than human (there are theoretical differences between trans and posthumans; since these do not affect the argument here, they are ignored for simplicity’s sake). This could be achieved through technological, biological, or chemical means. The goal, for this group, is to make humanity

better than it currently is. If that sounds like eugenics, that is because transhumanists also have roots in eugenics.

- b) Utilitarian and longterm thinking allows for the paradoxical transformation of humanity into something that it is not, theoretically ‘ending’ humanity. Space expansionists look to the stars as a means of preserving the well-being of future generations. The goal is to expand humanity to every possible livable surface of the reachable universe. By expanding the space in which humanity exists civilization is protected from localized disaster. Additionally, the more humans there are across the universe, the more ‘good’ is being created and the more the utilitarian sense of moral correctness is served.

- c) The final group posites the solution of digitalizing life. The most utilitarian group of the bunch, their goal is to create the best lives possible for this posthuman spacefaring future within a series of simulations (MacAskill, 2022)

The problem with these solutions for humanity’s continuation is that they require the sacrifice of the present. Transhumanism justifies eugenics, space expansionism justifies abandonment of the earth and encourages a view that sees both the earth and universe as a whole as a resource to be used in the securing of humanities future, and digitalizing humanity justifies the abandonment of the physical. These all justify the destruction of current realities which other philosophies consider to be morally significant for the sake of ‘ifs’ and ‘maybes.’ Additionally, they instrumentalize the value of any possible means to achieve these ends, which

includes natural beings and processes. Moral consideration of the future is an important idea to grasp for preservation of certain goods, but unbridled it inevitably leads to these extremes of thought.

IV. Society Shaping Ethics

For any given position from which we start, whether that be Longtermism, Neoliberalism, Christianity, or Relationality, there are philosophical and social consequences. Those consequences can, in turn, become physically expressed in oppression of people or ecological decline. The most globalized and widespread consequence of starting with neoliberalism, longtermism, or even some interpretations of Christianity is capitalism. Capitalism affects economies and societies all over the world. International trade is heavily influenced by its dominance in the West (and its trickle down expansion to former colonies), but so are the ways in which people think and act. For many people, ways of thinking outside of a capitalist system can seem inconceivable. So what are the effects of capitalism and how does this affect nature and our world?

a) Capitalism – Divide and Conquer

Another way to look at the human-nature relationship is through the lens of capitalism. Economic systems and their consequences can inform the relations between humans and nature as part of the system of human production. The capitalist system works by making people view individual workers as being the sum of their capital. This is brought about by the establishment of wage labor. Wage labor reduces the value of a person's time and energy to simply monetary value. People working in a wage-based system work to produce something and are then paid in a universal exchangeable "item," i.e., "money." While this does create certain benefits, it also

separates the workers from the products of their labor. Karl Marx asserts, “This fact expresses merely that the object which labour produces—labour’s product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labour.” (1884, p. 71, his emphasis) In sum, everything an individual works for is separate from them. They work to produce something that someone else owns and then barter with. The worker receives a wage for their work not the object they produced and, because of this, their labor becomes the product. This is a deviation from historical methods where a worker in a given trade would craft an object, for instance a pair of leather shoes, and then barter that for someone else’s crafted object, say a wool jacket. In the capitalist system the workers do not own the items they craft and are thereby no longer selling their product so much as their labor. This divide between workers and the things which they produce allows for a view of the workers which reduces them to an equation of capital produced and wage invested. Ideally those two will balance so that the more money one has, the more productive of an individual they are. This, in turn, reduces individual worth into how much money they make. Simply put, people’s values become the sum of their monetary values.

Living in a society that runs on a capitalist economic system means that people’s basic motivations revolve around earning a wage. Earning a wage means survival since it is essentially the only way that anyone who lives in a capitalist system can eat or have shelter or function on most social levels. The amount earned also tends to be correlated with the amount of freedom or, to put it differently, the lack of restraints in one’s life. Pierre Charbonnier writes, “we close our eyes to this experiment and its consequences because they clash with what is most dear to us, or what often appears as such, namely the possibility of enjoying absolute, unconditioned

freedom.”(2021, p. 9) Charbonnier is stating here that because money allows for greater options in the capitalist world, it has become associated with an imagined concept of potentially unlimited freedom. This sense of unlimited freedom is not only physically impossible, as we are constantly limited by the rules of reality, but also unreasonable since limits can give life greater quality. An example of this is games in which the acceptance of rules and limits actually improves one’s experience, for example, restrictions on use of hands or feet allow for the rich experiences of basketball or soccer. Here, artificial limitations are accepted to actually make a task more fun than it otherwise would be.

By conflating the dream of unlimited freedom with the accumulation of money, acquiring freedom also becomes one of the highest goals of capitalist societies. Capitalism, through the connection between money and ability to engage with the world, makes seeking wealth, and therefore freedom, the ultimate goal of society. Celebrities, millionaires, and corporate overlords are held in high esteem regardless of what they do because they have proven to be the best at doing what the society cares about: gathering wealth. Because gathering wealth becomes the most important goal for capitalist societies people who have gathered more wealth than others are viewed as doing something right, or at least better, even if the way they got there breaks other moral or social rules. This is how companies like Nike have abused third world industrial labor laws and child work forces publicly, things that in most societies are considered wrong, and have suffered no significant social push back. For example, in the United Kingdom a study was done that found that it would take 26 years for a low-income citizen to produce the same amount of carbon dioxide as a high-income citizen produces in one year. (Fiona Harvey, 2022,) By accumulating more wealth than other people they have insulated themselves from other questions of doing things correctly. This leads to a gap between the senses of social and moral

responsibility to be found between the wealthy and the poor, and in which the poor are expected to uphold higher moral standards more frequently than those who have more money.

With this mindset behind most people's stance on life and their environments within the current global community, it is easy to see how things like nature become devalued. By a similar process to how human labor leads to an alienated product, nature's value becomes the sum of its potential capital. This capitalist mindset, which has been growing for over two centuries, has led to an outlook on the natural world as resource to be fed into the capitalist machine. Henri Lefebvre questions whether, after industrialization, nature can even be thought of as anything but a resource. He states, "Nature is also becoming lost to thought. For what is nature? How can we form a picture of it as it was before the intervention of humans with their ravaging tools?... nature is now seen as merely the raw material out of which the productive forces of a variety of social systems have forged their particular spaces." (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 31) Capitalism reinforces an attitude that views human value as equivalent to their individual potential to create capital. This view extends to human environments and, thanks to the globalization of capitalism, to all of nature consequently. John Foster states in *Ecology Against Capitalism*:

This failure of economists to understand that human society and the human economy exists within a larger biosphere and that undermining the conditions of life is bound to undermine the conditions of production takes us to the heart of the failure of both neoclassical economics and the self-regulating market system itself. Nature is not a commodity and any attempt to treat it as such and to make it subject to the laws of the self-regulating market is therefore irrational, leading to the overexploitation of the

biosphere by failing to reproduce the conditions necessary for its continued existence.
(2002)

Humans and nature have become a resource to be exploited. By a strange process of abstraction capitalism has separated humans from nature by abstracting human production and created an artificial system for humans to understand the world through. By that same token humans and nature are also reunified in an artificial way through their mutual objectification as exploitable resources.

A common and rather mathematical way to express the result of a capitalist mindset is GNP. GNP stands for Gross National Product and is essentially an equation to determine how well a nation's economy is doing. That equation is roughly: $GNP + imports = consumption + gross investment + increase of stocks + exports$. (Naess, 1989, p.110) Ideally, if a country is in the positive, the GNP will indicate the strength of a nation's economy and the welfare of its citizens. This is often taken to be the case but ecosophist Naess argues that economic growth and positive GNP do not actually indicate public welfare. He states, "an increase of £1m-£2m spent on anti-smoking educational measures combined with a decrease from £80m to £70m on advertising and promoting tobacco represent a 'lamentable' decrease of £9m pounds in GNP." (1989, p. 113) This is an example of attempts at social improvement causing the GNP to take a negative turn. GNP would also be negatively affected by people working from home or not eating out at restaurants.

GNP tends to be used as a blanket assessment of prosperity, but it isn't an adequate measurement and it has a hard time distinguishing between things. The biggest problem with GNP, however, is that it does not distinguish between wants and needs. In fact, it typically

promotes wants above and beyond fulfilling needs. Naess writes, “In GNP there is no place for a distinction between waste, luxury, and satisfaction of fundamental needs...” (1989, p. 113) This lack of distinction means that as the economy is pushed eagerly towards eternal growth, the unlimited nature of our desires is reinforced. GNP growth is associated with the fulfillment of our desires and conflated with the understanding that those come after our basic needs. Naess continues, “GNP growth tends towards increasing the distance between the individual’s material aspiration level (world of material desires) and the individual’s actual economic possibilities.” (1989, p.113) The GNP is indicative of the larger capitalist system. Unlimited growth and an indulgent fulfillment of desires in addition to or instead of needs look good to the system despite the fact that they hide an increasing disconnection between people’s economic goals and their actual capabilities.

Being critical of capitalism and its consequences is helpful to illuminate the modern societal and cognitive biases that constitute the base of many ecological ethical problems, but it does not solve problems. Many capitalists would argue that this criticism is weak because it does not address the increased capability of wealthier people to counteract ecological problems. Having greater wealth, which is the end goal of the capitalist economic system, means greater possibilities for action, as Pierre Charbonnier stated, hence greater freedom. This drastic increase in options and effective action provided by centralized wealth can be expressed in ways that return value back to nature; therefore capitalism has greater potential for real impactful ecological change. For example, the CEO and founder of Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard, has given away all of his shares to a trust which will use all profits gained from Patagonia to help with the largest of the current ecological problems: climate change (Rupert Neate, 2022). This choice would mean nothing, however, if it weren’t for the fact that Patagonia is a multi-billion dollar

company. Billionaires have the choice to make use of their increased options and power for the benefit of the natural world as well. In addition to this, the capitalist economic system is premised on the idea of competition leading to the best products selling the best. In societies which value their environment the definition for best in any product line would need to include a level of consideration for the environment. This means that capitalism, by means of a competitive market, *could* lead to products which are designed to be healthier for the environment than products designed in less competitive settings.

Even if these arguments were to provide a valid counterargument to Marxist critiques of capitalism, they miss the most important point of Marx's argument. Capitalism encourages obtaining wage over everything else. The end incentive and ultimate good of capitalism is the accumulation of capital. This creates freedom for the individual that controls the capital. Yes, that freedom can be expressed in altruistic ways like Yvon Chouinard has done, but that is not what capitalism motivates the average billionaire to do. Chouinard gave up control of his capital and thereby limited his perceived freedoms which is something that goes against everything capitalism teaches.

This places Chouinard's economic philosophy somewhere outside of standard capitalism. Most capitalists in Chouinard's position would continue to use the capital they have to gain even more regardless of the consequences to others. This is evident since the current global economy is dominated by capitalism, and yet most billionaires are only contributing to the world's carbon emissions and not doing much at all to counteract it. Chouinard is an exception, not a rule. A quick look at the history of capitalism will also reveal that the best products do not always sell the best products (in terms of design, quality, etc.) e.g. electric cars such as the Columbia Motor Carriage, which outperformed gas powered cars in the early years of car design; or when video

first came to be, of the two main systems Betamax and VHS, the former was superior but the latter won the “media” battle and thus the market one. Capitalism does promote competitiveness, but with a mindset that only cares about profit. It is a zero-sum competitive system whereby your profits come purely through others’ expenses. When having one’s product sell best is the goal, rather than creating the best product, inferior products (which includes those that are more environmentally damaging) can be promoted through various means to sell better than their superior competitors.

V. **Responsibility**

We've explored the social consequences of various philosophical starting points in regard to the human nature relationship, but why does this matter to the world as a whole? Why do we need to actually change? Those social consequences influence our decision and policy making. This, in turn, affects the world around us. A lack of social responsibility leads inevitably to a lack of responsibility in our actions. This lack of responsibility, treating our actions with the same concern as a small child, has drastic consequences when it is realized on a global scale.

a. Actions and consequences

The very real, physical, consequences of the current social, economic, and political climate are numerous and varied. Many are the direct result of specific corporate action. For example, the supposedly green power company Drax, based in the UK, has been clearcutting environmentally important forest to then burn it (rather than using coal) for their power plants despite claiming to be only burning waste from other clearcutting projects to receive government subsidies. Joe Crowley and Tim Robinson of BBC investigated this deception, "The Drax power station in Yorkshire is a converted coal plant, which now produces 12% of the UK's renewable electricity. It has already received £6bn in green energy subsidies." (2022) They found that despite the company's promises to not harm old growth forests and to use the left over materials of other logging projects to burn in their power plants, Drax had bought the logging rights to two sections of Canadian forest, one of which contained old growth forest. They also confirmed that Drax cut

down and took large swaths of these forests to burn in their facilities. Their motivation is clear: gaining extra money through government funding by way of loopholes. This behavior makes absolute sense under the capitalist system, but it ruins an ecosystem, it reduces the planet's ability to reabsorb carbon from the atmosphere, and the burning of wood instead of coal is actually much worse in terms of carbon emissions. Other consequences are more the result of the cumulative effort of consumption. Probably the biggest of these is climate change.

Climate change has consequences for all people. It is an ecological disaster on a global scale. By nature, the increase in atmospheric temperature affects everybody who lives within it. This is an indisputable negative for all of humanity. In addition to this, however, are increased negative consequences for the poorer residents of our planet. Earlier, we discussed how money is perceived as freedom within the capitalist system and how that is a false equivalency. In this instance, however, increased capital can lead to a general decrease in localized ecological consequences. An example of this is the 2003 heat wave in France:

The working-class [*ouvrier*] category seems still to be the one most at risk. This link between professional category and the risk of death could be due to persons' different sensitivity to risk, in function of their working careers. It could also be due to the inequalities among persons when faced with risk, on account of their different economic conditions. For example, the question of socio-professional category is linked to the number of rooms in the home . . . and we might suppose that people occupying large homes were more easily able to protect themselves by choosing the room least exposed to the heat. (Keucheyan, 2016, p.32)

Generally, the wealthier one is, the easier it becomes to dodge the ecological consequences of our current growth centered economy (and we also saw how being wealthier also has a much larger negative ecological impact, e.g., the amount of dioxide). Greater wealth offers one the ability to move around more freely to dodge localized disasters, create safeguards against personal harm from disasters, and potentially offload the consequences altogether as some longtermists would encourage us to do by moving out into space. According to both neoliberalism and longtermism these problems are not truly problems but simply expressions of the system. According to both Christian ideology and the ecosophical relational field, however, these are further evidence of the moral responsibility of humanity towards our relationship with nature.

b. Levels of obligation

In regard to our obligation to other life forms sharing the same planet as us, there are two conflicting trains of thought. On the one hand there is biospherical egalitarianism which encourages a view of the right to life as a universal to all living things and therefore unquantifiable and incomparable. On the other there is relative intrinsic value which is the notion that the right of each being to life is relative and rankable in order of moral importance. Relative intrinsic value is the common solution to the conflict that arises within biospherical egalitarianism. Egalitarianism struggles with the tension between the universal and undeniable right of every living being to their life and the need for most life forms to consume, in some way, others to continue their own lives. By ranking the importance of certain lives above others it

becomes easy to morally justify the killing and consuming of other living things. Common systems of ranking the importance of types of life are:

“ (1) If a being has an eternal soul, this being is of greater intrinsic value than one which has a time-limited or no soul. (2) If a being can reason, it has greater value than one which does not have reason or is unreasonable. (3) If a being is conscious of itself and of its possibilities to choose, it is of greater value than one which lacks such consciousness. (4) If a being is a higher animal in an evolutionary sense, it is of greater value than those which are farther down on the evolutionary scale” (Naess, 1989, p. 167)

There are some clear problems with these ranking systems, however. Determining who has an eternal soul and even defining what a soul is is by no means exact or scientific work. Similarly, being “more evolved” than another life form, as per the fourth system, is a murky classification. What determines if something is more or less evolved? Their relative closeness to us in the evolutionary tree perhaps.

These ranking systems fall to the flaw of vagueness, but the other two have even more concerning implications. For example, an infant human is not typically classified as being either self-conscious or reasonable and, as such, would be subject to the same justifications for killing as a chicken or cow. To give another example, under these systems killing a puppy would be justified. But why then does it sound so horrific to the average reader? This, as Naess would argue, is because the “equal right to unfold potentials as a principle is not a practical norm about equal conduct towards all life forms. It suggests a guideline limiting killing, and more generally limiting obstruction of the unfolding of potentialities in others” (1989, p. 167). By this he means

that all beings have an equal right to life guarantees, that the life of every being deserves moral consideration in equal measure, but not that all beings should be treated equally as a rule. For example, take the case of being hungry and killing a chicken. Instead of justifying the death of the chicken by saying that it is less valuable the proper justification would be that in order for me to live I must kill this chicken. In this situation the death of the chicken is unfortunate (and may make some sad), but the continued living of the person who consumes it is good. Naess also promotes different behaviors with different forms of life. Equality to the right of life does not mean that all life is and should be treated the same. Walking on grass is fine; walking on a cat is not. What this means for the moral obligation of humanity, however, is that unless we subscribe to the idea of relative intrinsic value, which has some glaringly large holes for a system of moral consideration, humans should care about the ways in which their actions directly and indirectly negatively impact the life around them.

VI. Practical Application

So far we have discussed the various starting points and their social and physical consequences, but now the question arises: what can we do differently? As Karl Marx says, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” (P.145) The advocated encouragement for readers to adjust and improve their behavior and attitudes here is reciprocated by the author’s endeavors to go beyond mere philosophical interpretation.

a. How does this apply to the real world?

A possible solution can be found in the Nordic notion of *friluftsliv*, a philosophy of outdoor recreation that translates directly to ‘open air life’ or ‘free air life.’ The purpose of this philosophy is for one to come to nature on its own terms. It has been described as, “about feeling the joy of being out in nature, alone or with others, feeling pleasure and experiencing harmony with the surroundings” (Dahle 2003, p. 248) This entails, in practical terms, a set of guidelines for interacting with nature that are as follows:

- A respect for life and landscape
- Identifying with the life and landscape
- Minimal strain upon nature
- Maximum self-reliance

- Deinstrumentalization
- Adjustment from urban life (Naess, p.179).

This means that when interacting with nature, we should understand that it should be more than just a tool to us and that it should be a consistent and important part of our lives. This is not to say that nature gains value through its interaction with our lives, but has its own intrinsic value that we should strive to appreciate.

The way that outdoor recreation currently works is built on a system of preservation. Natural spaces have been set aside for public use, but the combined demand for time in natural spaces and lack of non-instrumental value being placed upon those spaces has led to a constrained experience in which the rules of engagement with nature are incredibly strict and accessibility is necessarily limited. “Instead of entering a realm of freedom, one feels that one is in some kind of museum ruled by angry owners”(Naess, p.180). In Yosemite, for example, signs are posted everywhere telling people to stick to the trails and not feed the wild life. Those signs are rarely followed, but they exist due to the high level of traffic the park sees and the general lack of knowledge for how to respectfully interact with nature. At least in part this is due to the way in which, even being preserved, the wild spaces on our planet are treated instrumentally as an escape or an amusement park. This system cuts off the ability of those who enter to identify with the landscape and express self reliance as *friluftsliv* would have us do.

Additionally, the activity of going outdoors and enjoying nature has been cut off by not only urbanization and distance, but also industry. People are told that they cannot experience nature without products. The industry that has developed around outdoor recreation has pushed specialized equipment onto general enthusiasts in order to increase profits around large capital

outlays (Naess, p. 181). A barrier of economic capacity is placed around the ability to enjoy nature as capitalism thrives. Through this, the consumer works and works to earn the capital to buy the products they believe they need so that they can relax and enjoy nature. We build stress, work, and capital so that we can go take a brief respite before returning to that same work where we find that we again need respite. This feeds the capitalist system but not our own needs. “In contrast... the *friluftsliv* ideology avoided organized competitions and used relatively simple equipment...” (Gunnar Breivik 2021, p.2). Instead of the more conventional goals in modern society regarding nature trips: getting there, being more skillful, doing as many activities as possible, and to use equipment, *friluftsliv* encourages people to simply experience. To engage with nature in rich and varied ways. Since one is approaching nature on its own terms and merely seeking to connect, there is no need for competition or improvement or industry. These concepts are distinctly opposite to the core tenets of capitalism and because of this pertinent to more than just outdoor recreation.

The guidelines of *friluftsliv* can be applied to many aspects of our lives including our social relations, work experiences, economic goals, community goals, and ethical standards. The key is simply to remember that landscapes and life have a value of their own that is not instrumental and dependent upon any one individual. *Friluftsliv*, according to Naess, is dependent upon an understanding of nature as a gestalt experience within an interconnected web. Respecting our environments and each other can avoid some of the pitfalls of the current capitalist system we live in by negating the extreme attitudes that neo-liberalism has gradually wrought. This would be an aggressive adjustment from the status quo of the majority of the modern world.

To the western mind, born and raised as a capitalist, *friluftsliv* can seem a bit extreme. There are more easily integrateable methods for changing the ways in which we interact with the natural world. Enrique Dussel's (2013) critical ethical consciousness is a method for dealing with normative ethical systems but it can also be applied to the current capitalist system. It may seem like a leap to go from ethical systems to economic ones but under neoliberalism those two tend to be conflated, and the way in which business is practiced is heavily determined by the moral sets that govern its participants.

Dussel's critical ethical consciousness is meant to combat the natural iniquities that arise within normative ethical systems. Normative systems create guidelines for how to live the "good" life as set forth by themselves. This means that certain behaviors, appearances, lifestyles, mindsets, and abilities are valued above others. In neoliberalism, for example, the accumulation of capital, for its various social and economic uses, is very highly valued. Generating wealth is seen as the path to the "good" life in this system. As guidelines, these systems will always point the users towards the behaviors that should be sought after within the group it is implemented in and away from things that detract from the perceived "good" life. Dussel's problem with these systems is that by their very nature, they negate certain groups. These typically being the newcomers, outsiders, losers, and disenfranchised.

"The utopian project of the prevailing world system, which is becoming globalized, is revealed as being in contradiction with itself, given that the majority of its possible participants have become victims deprived of the ability to satisfy needs that this same system has proclaimed rights" (Dussel 2013, p. 217).

By claiming that there is a best way to live one's life these systems inherently negate other ways of life. In some instances this can be good, such as saying that murdering people is bad. People who make a habit of murdering other people should not be upheld as paragons of proper human behavior. The other side of this coin, however, is when people are told that being expressive is bad. Looking back at the 1950's in the US, men were expected to never express sadness and bottle up emotions and women were expected to be incapable of independent living. These traits were upheld as positive within that society due to the prevailing societal mores. In retrospect it is apparent that these traits can lead to unhealthy lives according to the modern systems for normative behavior. Dussel claims, "This is why the "good" norm, act, institution, or ethical system formally or intersubjectively loses its validity, or hegemony. Critical-ethical consciousness produces an 'inversion,' a practical and ethical 'transfiguration' that is not simply theoretical" (Dussel 2013, p.217). This is what the critical ethical consciousness that Dussel proposes does. It inverts the negations within an ethical system. Notice that, while he finds problems with normative ethical systems, Dussel does not do away with them entirely. His solution is for a given system's participants to be critically aware of the ways in which its own people can become disenfranchised by the self-same system. Once aware of how certain promoted behaviors can lead to the negation of other people it is then the job of each participant to negate those negations.

The application of this theory to economic and social systems that currently govern the majority of us is what I propose next. The problems with capitalism, neoliberalism, longtermism, Christian roots, and even ecosophy are well documented and discussed. People, given education and choice, can become aware of the ways in which prevailing systems negate certain people and communities. The moral obligation that Dussel argues for then is to negate those negations that

we have been made aware of. This is not a “low effort” method for ethical decision making. It requires constant awareness and attention to the current system and problems, yet can be implemented without the complete revolution of society away from capitalism and neoliberalism which is so deeply ingrained.

The goal here is not to expect a social revolution or a massive paradigmatic shift away from capitalism, but rather to make sure people understand the basis for the system they live within and how to not fall into its traps. Instead of allowing our capitalist upbringing to encourage a neoliberal view of our fellow humans and the world we live in, we should find ways for the intrinsic value of those things to express themselves. Capitalism as a system will still work without humans acting solely as consumers and nature existing as an instrument to their fortunes. People can still produce labor. Owners can still provide wages. Products and purchases can still provide power. The important part is to start from an understanding of things existing separately from the system. Capitalism is an abstraction of real human effort. People, jobs, and products existed before capitalism did. Allowing the system that is the result of the abstraction of real things to inform our views on how those real things exist is putting the cart before the horse. Humans can exist as they did before capitalism, as more than the sum of their productive power, and still have capitalism work around them. The key is to be critically conscious of the system.

Yvon Chouinard provides an example of how this can be accomplished. As mentioned earlier (section four), Chouinard, on account of his philosophy towards business, gave away all of his shares of Patagonia to a trust which will use the money to fight climate change and preserve natural areas. This action represents a way of working within a capitalist system while not falling into the traps of greed, maximizing capital, and instrumentalizing everything. Chouinard started his business with the understanding that the purpose of it was to provide ways

for people to access nature easier. He started with climbing pinions and grew this into an operation that includes basically every outdoor recreation product under the sun. By keeping this initial goal in mind and having an understanding of the inherent value of connecting with nature, Chouinard has kept a mentality mostly free from the social influences of capitalism. Because of this, he is able to give his profits back to nature. Not only can he see how directly his continued business success relies upon the continued well-being of nature, but he also simply sees the innate value that it holds. Money, an artificial and abstract system, cannot help him any further. He was just as free to do what he loved when he was making pinions out of his back yard as he was as the lead shareholder of his billion dollar company if not more so. That money can be better used to give back and help repair the things that get broken as a consequence of the capitalist engine. This is an option for other large companies as well. Not every billion dollar company relies so heavily on natural spaces for their success, but every company relies in some way upon the world we live in for space and/or resources. Chouinard's business and actions reflect the result that a *frilufstliv* lifestyle can have in the current economic climate. This lifestyle can still offer successful business practices within a capitalist system. It also can create a greater awareness which allows one to negate the negatives of capitalism in a critical ethical way. This creates a functional economic system that, in theory, would reduce the harm the current system places on the natural world and therefore itself.

VII. Conclusion

Karl Marx stated: “When people speak of the ideas that revolutionize society, they do but express that fact that within the old society the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace” (1848, p. 31). Hopefully the elements of a new, more aware, and more active society can arise to mitigate the consequences of the current one and lead the way into a culture with healthier understandings of nature and our moral responsibility to it.

The basic philosophies which inform our understandings of nature also determine the consequences of human moral obligation to the natural world. To begin with the problematic triad of longtermism, neoliberalism, and capitalism then. Longtermism determines that humans are morally responsible for those actions that affect nature so long as they are made in consideration of current humans and all future humans. This means that the biosphere is extrinsically valuable as a means for the betterment of human lives. It will be cared for so long as that is the best good for humanity. It can, within this philosophy, still be ethically abused if it benefits the long term future of humanity. Neoliberalism, which is the predominant underlying philosophy of the globalized capitalist world, justifies any action regarding the natural world as long as it contributes to the creation of capital. The growth and health of the economy is the greatest good upon which all other things must then derive value from. As we saw, other stances that include responsibility into their moral reasoning are more melioristic for the environment.

The Christian view, while having a vast and variegated history of interpretations, sees nature as God’s creation and as having its own intrinsic good because of this. This means that humans are responsible for their actions regarding nature either as its masters or its caretakers. This does

not deny the possible use of nature instrumentally, but it does require a level of care for the world around us since its continued existence is the continued good of God. Within the Buddhist-inspired philosophy of relational interdependence of Arne Naess, humanity and nature are interconnected and interdependent. This means that any negative effect human actions have on nature will be reflected back upon them in some fashion. This means that even if nature wasn't, within this philosophy, considered to be intrinsically valuable, the consequences to humans would be morally unacceptable.

This is not only a theoretical matter. It behooves each of us to take steps to minimize our ecological footprint. The Nordic outdoor philosophy of *friluftsliv* offers concrete and clear ways to enjoy nature on its own terms. Additionally, Dussell also provides us with a framework to negate the negations that result from hegemonic ethical and societal systems. Through a combination of these changes and constant vigilance a better option from the current system is available.

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