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Intrinsic value as a topic of argument, not a premise of policy: A response to the Conguillío Statement

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The Conguillío Statement asserts that ecosystems possess intrinsic value and presents this claim as part of the normative responsibilities of ecologists. Although such language is common in ecology, it is rarely accompanied by a sustained philosophical defense. This paper examines what would be required for the claim to succeed. If "intrinsic value" is understood in a modest sense—meaning that ecosystems are valued for their own sake by individuals or communities—then the claim is defensible but generates only limited and attitude-dependent reasons for protection. If, however, intrinsic value is understood in a stronger sense that can ground binding moral duties that apply irrespective of personal or cultural commitments, then significant difficulties arise. Ecosystems lack the kinds of features—such as consciousness, interests, or unified welfare—that have traditionally grounded strong claims of intrinsic value. Attempts to treat ecosystem-level values as independent of human welfare also face the challenge of explaining how conflicts between competing values are to be resolved. In the absence of a clear account of what is meant and how it is justified, the intrinsic value claim remains philosophically unsettled. Conservation goals can be defended without assuming this claim as a foundational moral premise.

KEYWORDS
intrinsic value, environmental ethics, moral justification, value pluralism

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recently, a group of 33 ecologists published the *Conguillío Statement* detailing the alleged values and responsibilities of ecologists (Arnillas et al., 2024). The statement was introduced to ecologists at a workshop held during the December 2024 annual meeting of the British Ecological Society, run by Hazel Norman from the society and Marc Cadotte from

the University of Toronto—both among the coauthors of the statement. As part of the statement, the authors claim that it is our (ecologists') general responsibility to:

> *"Consider the **intrinsic value** of natural ecosystems, acknowledging that these ecosystems and all living organisms require space and resources **to thrive**."* (Arnillas et al., 2024, p. 5; emphasis added)

What does this claim mean, and why would the authors make it? Although the Conguillío Statement provides the immediate motivation for this paper, the claim that ecosystems possess intrinsic value is neither new nor unique to that document. Similar language appears throughout conservation biology, often invoked as a foundational justification for protection. The present argument, therefore, addresses not merely a single sentence in a recent preprint but a broader and recurring *normative claim*[1] within ecology.

This claim, as often used, lacks a clearly articulated rationale, evidence, or supporting argument. Ecologists would do well to remember Hitchens' Razor (Wikipedia contributors, 2024): "*What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence*." For the claim to function as a foundation for binding moral responsibility, it requires a defense. Without such defense, its normative authority cannot simply be assumed. For discussion of burden-of-proof norms in philosophy, see Flew (1950) and Rescher (1977).

In this paper, I argue that the claim that ecosystems possess intrinsic value can be defended only if the term is understood in a relatively modest sense—namely, that ecosystems are valued for their own sake by individuals or communities. However, if intrinsic value is meant in the stronger sense often implied in conservation rhetoric—one capable of *grounding binding moral duties*[2] that apply irrespective of personal or cultural commitments—then the claim faces serious difficulties. Neither attempts to extend the usual grounds of human intrinsic value to ecosystems nor appeals to multiple independent sources of value successfully establishes such a robust conclusion. For this reason, ecologists should treat the intrinsic value claim not as an established ethical foundation, but as a substantive philosophical position whose grounding conditions and normative implications require explicit defense.

I suggest that the authors of the Conguillío Statement are implying more normative weight to the intrinsic value claim than is necessary to support their broader conservation aims. After clarifying the different ways "intrinsic value" can be understood, I examine why ecologists are drawn to this language and argue that ecosystems are unlikely to qualify as bearers of intrinsic value in the stronger sense capable of grounding binding moral duties. Because the argument unfolds through several conceptual distinctions, I provide a "roadmap" in Box 1 to clarify its structure. The conclusion may be unwelcome to some readers, but careful conservation advocacy requires that we rely on claims we are prepared to defend under scrutiny, especially when addressing audiences beyond those already persuaded.

The analysis that follows is situated primarily within the Western analytic tradition of moral philosophy. This is not because that tradition enjoys universal authority, nor because ecologists consciously adopt it when invoking intrinsic value. Rather, it is because much contemporary environmental policy and academic debate proceeds in dialogue with analytic concepts such as moral duties, justification, and consistency. The argument is therefore conditional: if the intrinsic value claim is intended to ground binding moral duties, then some defensible account—within whatever

[1] A *normative claim* is a statement about what ought to be the case—what is morally right, wrong, justified, or required—rather than a descriptive statement about empirical facts. Normative claims prescribe or evaluate; descriptive claims report how things are.

[2] To say that intrinsic value can *ground binding moral duties* is to say that it does more than express admiration or preference: it provides a reason for action that applies to moral agents regardless of their personal commitments. A value grounds a duty when the fact that something has that value is what explains why we are morally required to treat it in certain ways. A duty is binding when it does not depend on whether one happens to care about, endorse, or benefit from the valued entity. Thus, if ecosystems possess intrinsic value in this strong sense, that value would itself explain why ecologists (and others) are obligated to protect them, even when doing so conflicts with convenience, economic interests, or prevailing attitudes.

philosophical framework one prefers—must explain how such value is grounded and how conflicts are to be resolved (see Section 6).

Box 1. Argument Roadmap: the Case Against Ecosystem Intrinsic Value

I develop my central argument through a series of conceptual distinctions and argumentative stages. Because the reasoning can be challenging to follow in continuous prose, this box presents the core logic in a condensed premise–conclusion format to clarify the inferential structure.

I. What must be shown

1. The Conguillío Statement asserts that ecosystems possess intrinsic value [Section 1]
2. A strong, objective conception of intrinsic value is the only conception that plausibly generates universalizable and attitude-independent moral duties [Sections 4 and 5.1]
3. Subjective and relational conceptions generate only indirect, attitude-dependent duties [Section 5, Table 1]

C1 Therefore, if the intrinsic value claim is meant to ground binding moral responsibilities for ecologists, it must rely on objective intrinsic value [Section 5]

Implication: *The justificatory burden is thus substantial*

II. The monist route does not deliver

4. In monist extensionist theories, objective intrinsic value attaches to entities in virtue of morally relevant properties such as sentience, autonomy, interests, or a unified welfare [Section 7.1, Table 1]
5. Possession of such properties makes an entity a welfare-bearing subject whose good can be advanced or harmed in its own right [Section 7.1]
6. Ecosystems lack sentience, autonomy, interests, or a unified welfare that can be harmed or benefited in this morally relevant sense [Section 7.1]
7. Where these grounding properties are absent, extensionist monism lacks resources for attributing objective intrinsic value [Section 7.1]

C2 Therefore, ecosystems do not meet the conditions under which extensionist monist theories attribute objective intrinsic value [Section 7.1]

Implication: *If intrinsic value requires a bearer capable of welfare or interests, ecosystems do not satisfy the grounding criteria.*

III. The pluralist route undermines itself

8. Value pluralism may attribute objective intrinsic value to multiple, irreducible sources — for example, human welfare and ecosystem integrity — each grounded in distinct normative properties [Section 7.2]
9. If such sources are genuinely irreducible, no single, more fundamental value determines their relative weight [Section 7.2]
10. In cases of conflict, the values grounded in these distinct properties can generate competing normative claims [Section 7.2]
11. A defensible ethical framework must supply principled criteria of adjudication if it is to provide determinate guidance for action [Sections 4 and 7.2; as illustrated by the rainforest case in Section 2]

Box 1 (continued). Argument Roadmap: the Case Against Ecosystem Intrinsic Value

12. Absent such criteria, the attribution of multiple objective intrinsic values leaves practical deliberation normatively underdetermined [Section 7.2]

C3 Therefore, even if pluralism attributes objective intrinsic value to ecosystems, it does not by itself yield determinate guidance when ecosystem value conflicts with other objective values [Section 7.2]

Implication: *Without a principled account of adjudication, pluralism multiplies sources of value without resolving how they are to govern action.*

IV. The upshot

13. If neither monism nor pluralism successfully grounds objective intrinsic value for ecosystems [Sections 7.1 and 7.2]

C4 Then the claim that ecosystems possess objective intrinsic value lacks adequate philosophical support within these frameworks [Section 8]

C5 Accordingly, the intrinsic value claim should not be treated as a settled moral foundation unless its grounding conditions and normative implications are explicitly defended. [Section 8]

Implication: *If intrinsic value is understood modestly, it generates limited and attitude-dependent reasons; if it is understood strongly, it requires a defense that has not yet been supplied. In either case, its normative role must be clarified rather than assumed.*

Many ecologists, myself included, have a strong moral intuition that ecosystems *ought to* matter in their own right. Such intuitions are not trivial; they often motivate the very work of conservation. However, when intuitive commitments are translated into public or policy-facing claims—especially claims about intrinsic value and moral responsibility—they require careful articulation and defense. The purpose of this paper is not to dismiss those intuitions, but to examine whether the philosophical vocabulary used to express them can bear the *normative weight*[3] it is asked to carry.

To appreciate what is at stake, it is helpful to consider a case in which appeals to intrinsic value are not merely rhetorical affirmations, but grounds for concrete policy decisions that constrain human action. The following example isolates the structural difficulty that arises when claims of intrinsic value collide.

2 | A MOTIVATING CASE: CONFLICTING INTRINSIC VALUE CLAIMS

Imagine a large tropical rainforest designated as a strictly protected reserve. The justification offered by policymakers is explicit: *the ecosystem possesses intrinsic value and ought to be preserved for its own sake*. Its integrity, complexity, history, and ongoing ecological processes are said to warrant protection independent of human use. On this view, to fragment the forest, to diminish its biodiversity, or to alter its structure for economic purposes would constitute not merely a practical loss but a moral wrong.

[3] By *normative weight* I mean the deliberative force a value claim carries in determining what moral agents have reason to do. To attribute intrinsic value to an entity is to recognize it as morally considerable; to assign normative weight is to specify how strongly that consideration counts relative to others in cases of conflict. Normative weight, therefore, concerns the comparative strength of reasons generated by a value claim, not merely its recognition. An entity might qualify as intrinsically valuable yet possess relatively little normative weight when its claims are balanced against the welfare, rights, or interests of other morally considerable beings.

Within that forest lives an Indigenous community whose members have depended upon it for generations. Their subsistence practices include small-scale clearing, selective harvesting, hunting, and the use of particular species for medicine, ceremony, and material culture. Their identity, social structures, and intergenerational continuity are inseparable from their ongoing interaction with the forest. The forest is not merely a resource to them; it is home, ancestor, and archive of collective memory.

In response to international conservation pressure, the reserve's management plan prohibits further clearing and restricts hunting and extraction. These measures are designed to maintain ecosystem integrity in as undisturbed a state as possible. Enforcement is justified by appeal to the forest's intrinsic value: if the ecosystem is valuable in itself, then its protection is not optional, and human activities that compromise its integrity must be limited.

The resulting conflict is not hypothetical in structure, even if the details here are stylized. Even where ecological coexistence is possible in practice, conservation policy is frequently framed in ways that presume strict preservation as the moral default. On one side stands the claim that the rainforest ecosystem possesses intrinsic value and must be protected for its own sake. On the other stands the claim that the welfare, autonomy, and cultural survival of the Indigenous community possess intrinsic value and must be respected. Both claims are framed in non-instrumental terms. Both are asserted with moral seriousness. Both appear to demand overriding force.

If the forest's intrinsic value is understood strongly—such that damaging it constitutes a wrong to the ecosystem itself—then preservation may be thought to require strict limits on human alteration. Yet if the community's members possess intrinsic value in virtue of their interests, agency, or capacity for flourishing, then restricting their subsistence and cultural practices may also constitute a serious moral wrong. Appeals to economic efficiency or aggregate welfare do not capture what is at stake. The disagreement concerns *what is owed directly to distinct bearers of value*.

One might respond that careful management can harmonize these interests. In many cases, that is true. The present example is not intended to deny the possibility of coexistence, nor to suggest that Indigenous practices are necessarily ecologically destructive. Rather, it is designed to isolate a structural question: *what follows when two claims of intrinsic value issue incompatible prescriptions*?

If both the ecosystem and the community are said to possess intrinsic value, the mere assertion of that value does not determine which claim prevails in cases of conflict. Does ecosystem integrity override human subsistence? Do human interests always take precedence over ecosystem-level considerations? Are some human interests weightier than others, and if so, by what principle? Without further specification, the appeal to intrinsic value alone does not answer these questions.

The case thus sharpens the stakes of invoking intrinsic value in ecological discourse. When ecologists assert that ecosystems possess intrinsic value, they may intend to affirm that ecosystems matter in their own right. That conviction is often sincere and deeply held. But once intrinsic value is invoked as a ground of moral responsibility—particularly in policy contexts—it must be capable of guiding action in precisely these hard cases. It must tell us not only that something matters, but how much it matters relative to other things that also matter.

The rainforest case does not settle the issue. It does not assume that either preservation or unrestricted use is correct. Its purpose is diagnostic. It reveals that the language of intrinsic value carries normative implications that extend beyond rhetorical affirmation. If intrinsic value is to function as a foundation for binding responsibilities, it must supply, or be embedded within, a framework capable of adjudicating conflicts between competing bearers of value. In the sections that follow, I examine whether either a monist or a pluralist account of intrinsic value can meet that demand.

3 | INSTRUMENTAL VERSUS INTRINSIC VALUE

There are two fundamental types of arguments for why we ought to conserve ecosystems, those that turn on their *instrumental value* and those that turn on their supposed *intrinsic value*.

Instrumental value arguments are based on the usefulness of ecosystems for the well-being of humans (for examples, see Chapter 2 of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment report [2003]). While it's true that some ecosystems are beneficial to us and warrant conservation, relying solely on instrumental value will not secure all the conservation ecologists seek. There will always be ecosystems that may not be useful to us or are not *more useful* than the activities that could harm the ecosystem.[4] Furthermore, using instrumental value arguments leads to some uncomfortable implications. For example, if one ecosystem type provides more benefits than another, should we replace it? This is not an action that most ecologists would endorse (see Newman et al., 2017, Chapter 6 for further discussion). In fact, many ecologists believe that this type of thinking has contributed to the environmental harm we are trying to prevent.

Instrumental value need not be confined to human interests; organisms, populations, and ecological processes may be instrumentally valuable to one another in a wide variety of ways. Yet instrumental value must always be instrumental *for something*. Chains of instrumental justification cannot regress indefinitely; they must terminate in something taken to be valuable in itself, something genuinely "good" (though see constructivist accounts such as Korsgaard, 1996).[5] Intrinsic value thus differs from instrumental value in that it does not depend on usefulness to something else. Within contemporary ethical theory, it is widely accepted that at least sentient beings[6] plausibly possess intrinsic value, and extending intrinsic value to such beings is comparatively straightforward within frameworks that ground moral standing in interests, welfare, or the capacity for experience. The crucial question, however, is whether that extension can coherently reach beyond sentient individuals to ecological wholes such as ecosystems. Extending intrinsic value to such wholes is considerably more philosophically demanding, because the properties typically invoked to ground moral standing—interests, welfare, or unified subjects of experience—are not obviously present at the ecosystem level. The strength of instrumental value arguments turns on empirical evidence demonstrating comparative usefulness; the strength of intrinsic value arguments turns on philosophical reasoning about which kinds of entities can bear value in themselves. If ecosystems are to possess intrinsic value, they must satisfy the latter standard. Whether ethical theories can accommodate that claim is the issue we will turn to in Section 7. Before assessing specific ethical approaches, however, it is necessary to clarify what follows from attributing intrinsic value in the strong sense.

[4] Damming a river for hydroelectric generation or flood control might be an example. It's not inconceivable that humans might find greater utility in these uses than in the pre-dam river ecosystem.

[5] Not all moral theories accept that justificatory chains must terminate in intrinsic value. Some pragmatist or constructivist approaches deny that value requires an ultimate, attitude-independent terminus, and instead treat evaluative practices as sufficient to ground normativity. The present argument proceeds within the widely accepted assumption—especially in analytic moral theory—that instrumental value derives its justificatory force from something taken to be valuable in itself. See e.g., Parfit (1984); Rønnow-Rasmussen (2023).

[6] By *sentient beings* I mean entities capable of conscious experience, particularly the capacity to feel pleasure and pain or to undergo states with a subjective, experiential character. Sentience, in this sense, requires more than mere responsiveness to stimuli; it involves the presence of phenomenal consciousness—there being something it is like to be that entity. There is something it is like to be a squirrel; there is not something it is like to be a coffee cup. Many contemporary ethical theories treat sentience as sufficient (though not always necessary) for moral standing because the capacity for experiential welfare grounds interests that can be harmed or benefited.

4 | FROM INTRINSIC VALUE TO MORAL DUTIES

It is important to distinguish intrinsic value from *moral standing* or *moral considerability*.[7] An entity may be said to possess intrinsic (non-instrumental) value without thereby possessing interests, welfare, or direct moral status. Works of art, historical artifacts, or natural landmarks may be valued for their own sake without being subjects of welfare.[8] The argument here concerns a stronger claim: that ecosystems possess intrinsic value in a sense that grounds direct moral duties toward them. Only under that stronger interpretation does the appeal to intrinsic value generate the kind of responsibilities implied by the Conguillío Statement. If the intrinsic value claim is intended merely in the sense that ecosystems are to be valued non-instrumentally—analogous to artworks or cultural artifacts—then it is easier to defend, but it yields limited guidance for action.

In Section 5, I will offer a more technical account of what "intrinsic value" entails. First, however, it is crucial to understand what is at stake in the Conguillío Statement's intrinsic value claim. The claim that ecosystems have intrinsic value can be interpreted in at least two ways. One is what Morrow (2024) calls *weak intrinsic value*: it applies even to non-person-like entities but *does not* generate moral standing or direct moral duties. For example, an old-growth forest may be valued for its own sake by a community independently of the ecosystem services it provides, yet this need not imply that the forest can itself be harmed or benefited in the way a sentient being can. On this view, the wrongness of destroying it arises from the value people attribute to it, not from harm done to the forest as a bearer of interests. As Morrow puts it, weak intrinsic value is "*the most lightweight*" conception of intrinsic value; lacking the power to create moral obligations, it fails to compel the sort of actions the Conguillío Statement seems to have in mind.

By contrast, a *strong* conception of intrinsic value[9] *does* lead to moral standing or direct moral duties. If something has objective intrinsic value, then it is the kind of thing whose flourishing or destruction can constitute a moral wrong, independently of its effects on others. This stronger sense is probably what the Conguillío Statement envisions because, if it can be justified, it compels concrete actions to safeguard ecosystems. Recognizing an ecosystem as having strong intrinsic value makes it a genuine object of moral concern; decisions about how to treat such an ecosystem are then moral judgments rather than simple matters of convenience. As I will explain next, moral judgments differ from practical or preference-based decisions in that they must satisfy these three logical requirements[10]:

1. ***Overridingness*** refers to the idea that when making a moral judgment, one asserts that this judgment should *override* considerations of prudence, law, etiquette, and other norms. By overriding other considerations, a moral judgment has the power to compel correct behavior by moral agents.
2. ***Universalizability*** means that similar cases must be judged according to the same principle. If I believe that fur farming is wrong because it subjects sentient animals to unnecessary suffering for non-essential human purposes, then consistency requires that I apply the same reasoning to other practices involving comparable harms. Failing to do so without identifying a morally relevant difference reduces a moral judgment to a selective preference.

[7] *Moral considerability* refers to being the kind of entity toward which moral agents can have direct duties. I use *moral standing* and *moral considerability* interchangeably.

[8] For a careful distinction between intrinsic value and moral considerability in the context of ecosystems, see Cahen (1988).

[9] Morrow (2024) distinguishes weak intrinsic value from Kantian intrinsic value and Moorean intrinsic value. Here, both stronger notions are grouped under "strong intrinsic value" because they entail moral duties and recognize moral standing. Morrow argues that ecosystems and biodiversity *per se* only have weak intrinsic value.

[10] For discussion of universalizability and overridingness as features of moral judgment, see Hare (1952), Scanlon (1998), and Williams (1985).

3. ***Consistency*** or ***coherence*** is the requirement that my moral judgments make sense when taken together. While I cannot prove an ethical argument, it is reasonable to expect that—at a minimum—my ethical commitments are internally consistent. This is called a *coherentist theory of epistemic justification*.[11] For example, if I claim that intrinsic value always overrides economic considerations, yet support destroying an ecosystem solely for financial gain, my commitments appear incoherent, unless I can explain why one principle does not apply in that case.

In contrast to moral judgments, judgments about prudence—those relating to what is best for oneself—are considered neither universalizable nor overriding. What might be best for me may not necessarily be best for you, and moral judgments override our personal interests. Some other types of judgments may be universalizable but not overriding. For example, in many cultures, there is an expectation to greet someone warmly upon meeting them. This etiquette norm is universalizable in the sense that people generally agree that it applies to everyone in normal circumstances. However, it is not overriding, as there may be situations in which a moral concern overrides the expectation of a polite greeting. For instance, if someone is in immediate danger, rushing to help them would be more important than stopping to say hello. Aesthetic judgments are also seen as universalizable but not overriding.

The reader should take particular note of the strategic appeal of this move. If we can say that our moral judgments about ecosystems override our other interests (e.g., instrumental ones), then conservation claims acquire significant normative force. But this implication cuts both ways. If ecosystems possess objective intrinsic value in the strong sense described here, then their protection must sometimes override even substantial human interests. The rainforest case introduced earlier (see Section 2) illustrates the point. If ecosystem integrity truly possesses overriding moral force (see Section 5.1), then restrictions on subsistence practices are not unfortunate side effects but required moral constraints. If, however, such constraints are unacceptable, then the intrinsic value being invoked may not carry the overriding force assumed. Ecologists should therefore ask whether they are prepared to accept this consequence. If not, then the intrinsic value being invoked may not be the objective conception after all.

Only the objective conception of intrinsic value plausibly purports to satisfy the full force of overridingness and universalizability independently of evaluative attitudes. If those logical features are not secured, then the normative authority attributed to intrinsic value is correspondingly diminished.

The distinction just drawn between weaker and stronger senses of intrinsic value anticipates a further clarification that is now required. The argument so far has relied on the idea that only a sufficiently robust conception of intrinsic value could plausibly generate overriding and universalizable moral duties. But "intrinsic value" is used in several importantly different ways in both philosophical and ecological discourse. Some conceptions treat intrinsic value as dependent upon evaluative attitudes; others treat it as a feature of the world itself. These differences are not merely semantic. They determine what kind of moral force (see Section 5.1) a value claim can exert and whether it can ground direct duties toward ecosystems. The next section therefore offers a more systematic taxonomy of competing conceptions of intrinsic value and clarifies the distinct normative implications associated with each.

5 | COMPETING CONCEPTIONS OF INTRINSIC VALUE

Having distinguished strong from weak intrinsic value and clarified what moral judgments require, we can now ask what intrinsic value itself consists in. To claim that something has intrinsic value is to say that it is valuable for its own sake, rather than merely as a means to some further end. An entity may possess both intrinsic and instrumental value,

[11] By *coherentist theory of epistemic justification*, I mean that for a belief to be justified, it must belong to a coherent system of beliefs. For a system of beliefs to be coherent, the beliefs that make up that system must "cohere" with one another.

but the reasons grounding each are distinct: something may be useful to us while also being valued independently of its usefulness.

It is important to distinguish between the general *concept* of intrinsic value and competing *conceptions* of what makes something intrinsically valuable. Many people agree that intrinsic value means "value for its own sake," but they disagree about what grounds such value (see Footnote 2) and how it operates in moral reasoning. The central disagreement is not about how widely a judgment is shared, but about whether value depends upon evaluative attitudes *at all*.

Philosophers have offered several distinct answers to the question: what makes something intrinsically valuable?

One answer is that intrinsic value arises from evaluative attitudes. On this view—often called *subjective intrinsic value*—something has intrinsic value because it is valued non-instrumentally by a valuer. Importantly, such value need not be arbitrary or capricious. As O'Neill (1992) and Sandler (2008) argue, evaluative attitudes are typically grounded in reasons, reflection, and judgment. If many people value an ecosystem for its own sake, that fact itself provides a *prima facie* reason for its protection. However, on this view, value depends upon valuers; absent the relevant attitudes, the value would not exist.

A second family of views may be called *relational*. These accounts hold that intrinsic value arises through the interaction between valuers and features of the world. The valued object is not merely a blank screen for projection; its properties constrain or shape appropriate responses. For example, an ecosystem's complexity, rarity, or integrity may justify valuing it non-instrumentally. These features do not make the ecosystem valuable independent of human judgment, but they can explain why certain responses—such as respect or protection—are more reasonable than indifference or destruction. Some relational views emphasize culturally shared norms; others appeal to common human psychological dispositions. What unites them is that value remains dependent upon valuers, even if not reducible to idiosyncratic preference.

A third answer rejects the idea that value depends upon evaluative attitudes at all. On the *objective* conception, intrinsic value is a property of the world that human beings come to recognize rather than create or assign. If an ecosystem possesses objective intrinsic value, its value does not depend on being appreciated, endorsed, or even capable of being appreciated. The value is taken to exist independently of human attitudes.

Language used within conservation biology often appears to invoke this objective conception. For example, Soulé (1985, p. 731) describes species as possessing "*a value neither conferred nor revocable*," suggesting that their worth does not depend upon human recognition or endorsement. Similar formulations refer to ecosystems as valuable "in themselves" or as having value "independent of human interests." Such language implies more than widespread agreement or culturally shared norms; it suggests that value is a feature of the world rather than a projection of human attitudes.

These positions differ not in the number of people who happen to agree with a value judgment, but in what they take to be the source of value. On subjective and relational views, value is attitude-dependent. On the objective view, value is attitude-independent. The disagreement is therefore about *the grounding of normativity*,[12] not about social consensus.

As O'Neill (1992) notes, the term "intrinsic value" is sometimes used simply to mean non-instrumental value—value as an end rather than a means. But it is also used to mean non-relational value—value that does not depend on valuers. These senses come apart. Something may be valued non-instrumentally while still depending upon evaluative attitudes. The present argument concerns the stronger, non-relational conception of intrinsic value—objective intrinsic value—because only that conception plausibly generates universalizable, attitude-independent moral duties.

[12] By *normativity* I mean the aspect of discourse concerned with reasons, obligations, and evaluative standards—what counts as justified, required, or wrong. The *grounding of normativity* concerns what explains the existence and authority of such reasons.

The distinctions summarized in Table 1 reflect these different grounding claims and the corresponding level of moral force (see Section 5.1) they are capable of exerting. Where intrinsic value is conceived subjectively, the primary duties are directed toward the valuer rather than toward the valued object. If a person values an ecosystem for its own sake, I may wrong that person by destroying it, but I do not thereby wrong the ecosystem itself.[13] My obligation is indirect: it arises because of the effect of my action on someone who has moral standing. By contrast, if an ecosystem possessed objective intrinsic value, it would be a direct object of moral concern. Destroying it would constitute a wrong *to the ecosystem itself*, not merely to those who care about it. Relational views occupy an intermediate position: duties may extend beyond particular individuals, but they remain mediated through valuers rather than grounded solely in the object.

Conceptions of Intrinsic Value	Definition	Moral Force
Subjective	Intrinsic value is projected by conscious valuers onto a world that lacks inherent value	Attitude-dependent reasons; indirect moral consideration
Relational	Intrinsic value arises from the interaction between human psychology and specific features of the natural world	
Idiosyncratic	Intrinsic value arises from relationships that are unique to individuals	Attitude-dependent reasons; indirect moral consideration
Culturally shared norms and values	Members of specific societies may identify different classes of entities as intrinsically valuable	Attitude-dependent reasons; direct moral consideration from those within the culture, indirect consideration from those outside
Hard-wired	Humans are hard-wired to make certain judgments about intrinsic value, leading to a convergence across different cultures regarding which natural entities they recognize as intrinsically valuable	Attitude-dependent but widely shared reasons; direct moral consideration. Yet the marked and ongoing disagreement about ecosystem intrinsic value makes a hard-wired grounding seem implausible.
Objective	Intrinsic value is a property of the external world that human valuers come to recognize; it is not assigned by humans	Attitude-independent reasons; direct moral consideration

TABLE 1 Conceptions of intrinsic value and a rough assessment of their relative moral force. Moral force is the power to compel right actions by moral agents. *Direct consideration* requires that moral agents consider the ecosystem's morally relevant interests. *Indirect consideration* indicates that moral agents do not give direct moral consideration to the ecosystem but instead focus their consideration towards other humans who themselves value the ecosystem for what it ist.

[13] Consider a coffee cup that has intrinsic value to you because it belonged to your mother and she used it every day for years before she died. If I deliberately break that cup, I no doubt harm you by destroying something you cherish. However, the wrong is done to you, not to the cup itself. The cup is the object of your valuing, but it is not the bearer of moral standing.

5.1 | Moral Force and the Scope of Intrinsic Value Claims

In Table 1, the various conceptions are associated with differing degrees of "moral force."[14] By this, I do not mean that intrinsic value—under any conception—automatically overrides all competing considerations. Even if humans possess objective intrinsic value, it does not follow that no circumstances could justify harming a human being. Moral deliberation frequently involves conflicts among values, and no plausible theory renders such conflicts impossible.

Rather, the differences concern the *scope*, *stability*, and *critical reach* of the reasons generated.

Scope refers to how widely the reasons apply. Subjective intrinsic value generates reasons for those who hold the relevant valuing attitudes, and for those who recognize the legitimacy of those attitudes. Culturally shared relational values may bind members of particular communities. Objective intrinsic value, by contrast, purports to generate reasons that apply to all moral agents, irrespective of their attitudes.

Stability concerns whether the reasons persist independently of changing preferences. If value depends upon actual valuing, then its normative force may diminish as attitudes shift. If value is independent of valuers, then its justificatory role does not fluctuate with opinion.

Critical reach concerns whether a value claim licenses moral criticism of those who fail to recognize it. Where intrinsic value is conceived subjectively, disagreement need not imply error. Where it is conceived objectively, failure to acknowledge the value can be treated as a mistake about the world.[15]

Differences in moral force should not be understood as differences in absolute priority. Neither subjective nor objective intrinsic value automatically overrides all competing considerations; both may be outweighed in cases of genuine moral conflict. The relevant distinction instead concerns the kind of reasons generated—whether those reasons depend upon evaluative attitudes or whether they purport to bind moral agents independently of such attitudes.

Understood in this way, subjective and relational intrinsic value are neither trivial nor insignificant. They generate genuine non-instrumental reasons for protecting ecosystems, especially where those ecosystems are valued for their own sake by individuals or communities. However, those reasons remain attitude-dependent: their normative force is mediated through the valuers whose commitments ground them. By contrast, the objective conception aspires to ground reasons that apply universally and independently of contingent evaluative commitments.

This distinction matters because the Conguillío Statement does not specify which conception of intrinsic value is intended. If ecosystems are said to possess subjective or relational intrinsic value, the justificatory burden is lighter, but the resulting duties are correspondingly mediated and limited in scope. If, however, ecosystems are claimed to possess objective intrinsic value, a more demanding philosophical defense is required. The following sections address that stronger claim. Before doing so, I briefly situate the argument within its broader philosophical tradition.

6 | METHODOLOGICAL FRAMING AND ALTERNATIVE TRADITIONS

Thus far, the discussion has been situated within the Western analytic tradition of moral philosophy. This framing is methodological rather than dismissive. Contemporary ecological science and environmental policy already presuppose norms of consistency, justification, and public reasoning that are characteristic of analytic moral philosophy. When ecologists invoke concepts such as intrinsic value, moral responsibility, or justice in academic and policy con-

[14] Recall that *normative weight* was defined in Footnote 3 as the comparative strength of reasons generated by a value claim; *moral force* concerns the scope and structure of those reasons.

[15] To deny that slavery is morally wrong is typically taken to involve a grave moral error. By contrast, to deny that dark roast coffee is better than light roast is not. In the first case, disagreement is treated as mistaken; in the second, as a difference in taste. This contrast illustrates the idea of critical reach.

School of Thought	Conception Intrinsic Value	Potential Western Analytic Critique
Indigenous Philosophies e.g. Winter (2021); Whyte (2018, 2020)	Nature and living beings are often viewed as kin, carrying a sacred or ancestral value that exists independently of human ascription.	Might argue that moral claims grounded in cultural or spiritual traditions lack universalizability. Such commitments could be seen as subjective or localized rather than systematically justified through a shared rational framework.
Ecofeminism e.g., Plumwood (1986)	Emphasizes the intrinsic worth of nature as intertwined with the liberation of marginalized groups, underscoring care-based, empathetic relationships rather than purely dispassionate logic.	Could contend that care-focused ethics do not provide a fully consistent or overriding framework. Critics may call for more explicit logical criteria to justify when or why empathy should take precedence over other concerns.
Deep Ecology e.g., Naess (2005)	Proposes an "ecocentric" or "biocentric" worldview in which all life forms and ecosystems possess intrinsic value, often invoking spiritual unity and holistic insights.	Might claim that a metaphysical or spiritually grounded approach lacks clear mechanisms for distinguishing legitimate moral responsibilities from subjective or mystical beliefs. Could view the argument as too vague for systematic ethical reasoning.
Earth Jurisprudence e.g., Burdon (2012)	Assigns inherent rights and moral/legal standing to natural entities (e.g., rivers, forests), positing that Earth itself is a rights-bearing subject.	May argue that granting legal personhood or moral standing to non-sentient entities overlooks the need for a rational basis for moral considerability. Critics could see this as conflating legal tools with genuine ethical justification.

TABLE 2 Selected non-Western or alternative environmental philosophy schools of thought and how they conceive of intrinsic value. The right-hand column illustrates how a Western analytical philosopher might challenge these conceptions, typically invoking overridingness, universalizability, clear moral foundations, or rational justifications as the basis for critique. For more on the concepts of universalizability and overridingness, see section 4.

texts, they are implicitly entering that shared justificatory space. The present argument, therefore, evaluates the intrinsic value claim within the framework that currently structures much of ecological discourse.

This does not deny that alternative philosophical traditions offer rich and meaningful accounts of the human–nature relationship. Indigenous philosophies, ecofeminism, deep ecology, and Earth jurisprudence, among others, articulate conceptions of value that extend beyond individual sentient beings and often treat ecosystems or natural entities as bearers of intrinsic worth. These traditions often ground moral commitments in relational, spiritual, communal, or holistic frameworks that differ in structure from those of analytic approaches.

Because the purpose of this section is descriptive rather than critical, these views are presented in summary form. It is worth noting, however, that critics have argued that positions attributing intrinsic value universally to all natural entities confront a structural difficulty: without a principled mechanism for resolving conflicts among competing values, their action-guiding implications may remain unclear (Routley, 1973; Routley and Routley, 1980). This concern appears in a more limited but concrete form in the rainforest example in Section 2, where competing claims of intrinsic

value issue incompatible prescriptions. Absent an adjudicative principle,[16] the appeal to intrinsic value alone does not determine what policy requires. The same structural question becomes central in the analysis that follows, particularly in Section 7.2.

Adopting any such framework in a public scientific or policy argument, therefore, requires more than citing its existence. It involves clarifying the standards of justification it employs and explaining how conflicts are to be resolved in practice. In the absence of such clarification, appeals to intrinsic value risk functioning as rhetorically powerful claims without clear guidance for action.

Table 2 provides a schematic overview of several influential approaches and illustrates how a philosopher working within the analytic tradition might question their justificatory structure—not to dismiss them, but to identify the points at which further argument would be required if they are invoked as grounds for binding moral duties.

The purpose of this section is, therefore, limited. I am not attempting to refute alternative moral traditions, nor to claim that analytic philosophy exhausts moral reflection. Rather, it highlights a structural point: if the Conguillío Statement's appeal to intrinsic value is intended to ground binding responsibilities for ecologists in academic and policy contexts, then that claim must be defensible within the shared norms of public moral justification that already govern those contexts. The next section turns from this survey to a more focused examination of how claims about ecosystem intrinsic value might be defended within monist and pluralist frameworks.

7 | WHY ECOSYSTEMS DON'T HAVE (OBJECTIVE) INTRINSIC VALUE

What kind of argument would be required to establish that ecosystems possess *objective* intrinsic value? The rainforest case (see Section 2) provides a concrete test: any adequate account must explain both what grounds ecosystem intrinsic value and how that value governs action when it conflicts with human welfare and cultural survival. If such a claim is to ground binding and universalizable moral responsibilities—as the Conguillío Statement implies—then it must satisfy two conditions. First, it must identify the properties in virtue of which ecosystems qualify as bearers of objective intrinsic value. Second, it must explain how that value governs action, including cases in which ecosystem value conflicts with other morally significant values. In other words, a defensible account must succeed both at the level of *grounding* and at the level of *normative governance* (i.e., how value claims guide action in cases of conflict).

Before turning to substantive proposals, it is useful to clear away several familiar but unsuccessful arguments. These 'non-starters' are outlined in Table 3. While space does not allow for an in-depth exploration of each, they are readily refuted and cannot bear the justificatory weight required for objective intrinsic value claims (see Newman et al., 2017, Chapter 9 for a thorough treatment).

Once these non-starters are set aside, two more philosophically serious strategies remain. The first is a *monist* approach, which attempts to show that ecosystems and humans fall under a single ethical framework and share the same grounding conditions for objective intrinsic value. The second is a *pluralist* approach, which allows ecosystems to possess intrinsic value on grounds distinct from those that apply to humans (and perhaps other sentient beings).

These approaches fail in different ways. Monism provides clear grounding criteria, but, as I argue below, ecosystems do not satisfy them. Pluralism avoids this grounding difficulty by permitting multiple irreducible sources of value,[17] yet it faces a different challenge: it must explain how such values are to guide action when they conflict. I

[16] An *adjudicative principle* is a rule or standard that explains how to resolve conflicts between competing values when they issue incompatible prescriptions.

[17] By *irreducible sources of value* I mean entities whose value does not derive from, or reduce to, the value of something else. An irreducible source of value is not merely instrumentally valuable, nor valuable solely in virtue of contributing to the welfare of other intrinsically valuable beings. Rather, it is posited as a fundamental locus of normativity, something that is good in itself and whose value cannot be fully explained

Claim	Why the argument fails
Ecosystems are intrinsically valuable because they are *natural*	Commits the *naturalistic fallacy*. The fact that something is natural is purely descriptive; it does not, by itself, establish that it is morally good or valuable. No set of descriptive facts entails a normative conclusion (the "is–ought" gap, Hume, 1739), and it remains an open question whether any natural property is identical with moral goodness (Moore, 1903).
Ecosystems are intrinsically valuable because they are *made up* of individual plants and animals which are intrinsically valuable	Commits the *fallacy of composition*. The fact that parts possess a property (e.g., intrinsic value) does not entail that the whole possesses that same property. Intrinsic value does not automatically aggregate upward from components to systems.
Ecosystems are intrinsically valuable because they *give rise* to individual plants and animals which are (or might be) intrinsically valuable	Commits an *origin fallacy*. Producing something that has intrinsic value does not entail that the producer itself has intrinsic value; at most, it establishes instrumental value. Causal generation does not transmit moral status.
Ecosystems are intrinsically valuable because they are *rare*	Rarity may justify special protection, but it does not establish intrinsic value. It describes the frequency of a type, not a moral property of the ecosystem itself (Gunn, 1980, p. 34).

TABLE 3 Some commonly encountered arguments for attributing intrinsic value to ecological wholes. These arguments face serious logical difficulties and do not, by themselves, establish intrinsic value (see Newman et al., 2017, Chapter 9 for further discussion).

discuss these strategies in turn.

7.1 | Monism

By *monism* I mean the view that all genuine moral duties ultimately arise from a single underlying ground of value, such that the same kind of property explains why humans and any other entities possess intrinsic value. Monist approaches attempt to extend to non-human nature the same kinds of considerations that are commonly thought to ground intrinsic value in human beings. As summarized in Table 4, philosophers have typically located human intrinsic value in properties such as rational autonomy, sentience (see Footnote 6), possession of interests, being a subject-of-a-life, or the capacity for flourishing. These proposed grounds for intrinsic value are widely discussed in the literature on moral considerability and environmental ethics (e.g., Cahen, 1988; Feinberg, 1974; Boorse, 1977; Singer, 1990; Regan, 1992; Taylor, 1986). While these accounts differ in important respects, they share a common structure: intrinsic value is grounded in features of individual subjects whose welfare can be benefited or harmed.

An extensionist argument proceeds by asking whether non-human entities possess the same morally relevant properties. It is relatively straightforward to extend intrinsic value to at least some non-human animals, particularly under views that ground value in sentience or the possession of interests (e.g., Singer, 1990; Regan, 1992). If the capacity to suffer or to have a welfare is what matters, then many animals plausibly qualify.[18]

by reference to other bearers of value. The present question is whether ecosystems plausibly qualify as such independent sources, or whether their evaluative significance is ultimately derivative. To posit multiple irreducible sources of value is, in effect, to endorse a form of value pluralism (see Section 7.2), since more than one fundamental locus of normativity would then structure moral reasoning.

[18] An alert reader might correctly notice a logical parallel with Section 2. If sentient animals possess objective intrinsic value, and ecosystems

The difficulty arises when we turn to ecological wholes such as species or ecosystems. Ecosystems lack consciousness, agency, and a unified welfare. They are not subjects of experience, nor do they possess interests in the sense required by extensionist theories (e.g., see Sagoff, 1984, 2008). While ecosystems may function well or poorly—exhibiting resilience, stability, or efficient nutrient cycling—these are instances of *functional goods*, not *welfare goods*. Functional goods concern how effectively a system operates according to its organizing processes. Welfare goods, by contrast, concern what is good or bad *for* a subject—an entity for whom things can genuinely go better or worse (see e.g., Boorse, 1977, Sagoff, 1984; but see also Rolston, 1994). Describing an ecosystem as healthy or degraded therefore does not imply that anything is benefited or harmed in its own right. Unless a unified welfare-bearing subject can be identified at the ecosystem level, systemic performance alone does not satisfy the criteria traditionally associated with objective intrinsic value within extensionist frameworks.[19]

If intrinsic value is grounded in the possession of morally relevant properties of the kind listed in Table 4, then ecosystems do not clearly qualify. If, alternatively, intrinsic value is said not to require a welfare-bearing subject, then proponents must explain what grounds that value and why ecosystems meet the relevant criteria. It might be objected that objective intrinsic value need not be grounded in the possession of interests or welfare, and that ecological wholes could possess such value in virtue of properties like integrity, complexity, or systemic organization. This is a coherent philosophical possibility. However, in the dominant strands of contemporary analytic moral theory, objective intrinsic value has been linked to the idea that something can be wronged *in its own right*—that there is an entity for whom things can genuinely go better or worse (see Feinberg, 1974; Darwall, 2006). When intrinsic value is detached from any notion of welfare or interests, it becomes less clear how it gives rise to direct moral duties rather than simply expressing admiration or approval. If ecosystems are to possess objective intrinsic value in this stronger, duty-grounding sense, proponents must therefore explain how purely systemic properties can themselves generate obligations toward the ecosystem, independently of any welfare-bearing subject. Until such an account is provided, the extension from individual subjects to ecological wholes remains philosophically incomplete. Absent such an account, the extensionist route does not successfully establish that ecosystems possess objective intrinsic value.

The Conguill'io Statement's appeal to ecosystem *thriving*[20] is therefore rhetorically revealing. To say that an entity thrives ordinarily suggests that things are going well *for it* in a welfare-relevant sense (e.g., Foot, 2001; Nussbaum, 2006; Taylor, 1986). The language does more than describe functional efficiency; it presents the ecosystem as the kind of entity whose condition can be better or worse in its own right. If that stronger reading is intended, then ecosystems are being treated as welfare-bearing subjects, and the Statement implicitly invokes the objective conception of intrinsic value. If only a functional sense is meant—resilience, integrity, or stability—then the term does not support claims about intrinsic value at all. Either way, the appeal to "thriving" does not remain neutral: it either presupposes the very point at issue or collapses into a claim about systemic performance.

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are alleged to possess it on different grounds, then conservation practices such as culling sentient animals to preserve ecosystem composition present another case of competing intrinsic value claims. In the absence of an adjudicative principle (see Footnote 16), it is unclear how such conflicts are to be resolved. See Section 7.2 for more discussion of this issue.

[19] A further complication, which cannot be explored here, concerns the ontological status of ecosystems. If ecosystems are not unified, mind-independent entities but instead theoretical constructs introduced for explanatory and pragmatic purposes, then it is unclear what sort of thing is being ascribed intrinsic value. The metaphysical question of ecosystem reality therefore bears directly on the plausibility of ecosystem-level moral standing. For discussion, see Garcia and Newman (2016); Newman (2025).

[20] The Conguillío Statement uses the term "thrive" rather than "flourish." In ordinary language, to say that an entity thrives typically implies that conditions are good *for it*—that its situation has improved in a way that benefits it. In moral philosophy, terms such as *flourishing* are often used to capture this welfare-oriented idea (e.g., Taylor, 1986). The question at issue is whether ecosystems possess such a unified welfare, rather than merely exhibiting systemic performance or functional integrity.

TABLE 4 Commonly proposed grounds for attributing intrinsic value to individual human beings. Each proposal identifies a property thought to make an entity a bearer of welfare to whom harms and benefits can accrue. For systematic philosophical discussion of these candidate grounds of moral status, see DeGrazia (2012) and Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2023).

Proposed Ground	Brief Description	Why Thought to Ground Intrinsic Value
Rational autonomy	Capacity for self-governance, practical reasoning, and moral agency.	Autonomous agents can choose ends and shape their own lives, giving them a status that commands respect rather than mere use.
Sentience	Capacity to experience pleasure and pain; having experiential states that can be positively or negatively valenced.	The capacity for suffering or enjoyment makes it morally significant how the entity is treated.
Possession of interests	Having a welfare that can be benefited or harmed; being the kind of entity for whom things can go better or worse.	If an entity has interests, then its good provides reasons for action independent of others' purposes.
Subject-of-a-life	Being an individual with beliefs, desires, memory, and a sense of the future, whose life has experiential unity.	A psychologically unified life generates moral claims because harms and benefits accrue to a continuing subject.
Capacity for flourishing	Ability to realize species-typical potentials or achieve forms of well-being characteristic of one's nature.	Flourishing provides an objective standard of better or worse states for the individual itself.
Unified welfare	Possession of a single, integrated welfare subject whose good can be promoted or damaged as a whole.	Moral evaluation presupposes a determinate bearer of welfare to whom harms and benefits accrue.

7.2 | Pluralism

It is important to distinguish *value pluralism* from pluralism about ethical theories or decision procedures. Value pluralism holds that there may be multiple kinds of value—such as welfare, autonomy, integrity, stability, or beauty—none reducible to the others. Pluralism about ethical theory, by contrast, concerns the coexistence of distinct modes of moral reasoning, such as consequentialist and deontological approaches. The present discussion concerns value pluralism.

Value pluralism in itself is neither unusual nor implausible. Many ethical views acknowledge a plurality of values that may come into conflict. Within environmental ethics, for example, integrity, stability, and beauty may be regarded as distinct values within a single normative outlook. The mere affirmation of multiple values does not, by itself, generate conceptual difficulty.

The difficulty arises when duties toward humans and duties toward ecosystems are taken to arise from fundamentally *different sources of moral value*. Suppose that human beings possess intrinsic value in virtue of sentience or the possession of interests, while ecosystems possess intrinsic value in virtue of integrity or systemic stability. If these values are grounded in irreducibly different properties, then conflicts between them require some principled account of adjudication. Without such a principle, pluralism identifies multiple objective values but does not yet explain how they govern action when those values compete. If, in practice, human interests were always taken to outweigh any duties toward ecosystems, then the attribution of intrinsic value to ecosystems would carry little independent normative significance. In that case, ecosystem intrinsic value would be affirmed in principle yet never constrain action. If,

however, ecosystem-level duties are sometimes capable of overriding human interests, then proponents must specify which human interests are sufficiently weighty to prevail and which are not. Absent such criteria, the appeal to intrinsic value does not by itself determine how conflicts are to be resolved. Affirming that both humans and ecosystems possess intrinsic value is not enough; without a principled account of their relative weight, the view does not yet provide determinate guidance for action.

The practical significance of this structural demand is evident from the rainforest case introduced earlier (Section 2). There, both ecosystem integrity and the welfare and cultural continuity of the Indigenous community were said to possess intrinsic value and must be protected for their own sake. If both ecosystem integrity and human welfare are said to possess intrinsic value, the appeal to intrinsic value alone does not determine which claim prevails. A further account is required to explain how these competing values are to be weighed in practice.

This concern does not reject value pluralism. It highlights a structural requirement. Where multiple irreducible grounds of value are affirmed, an account of their relative weight or ordering is necessary if the view is to provide determinate guidance. Absent such an account, the appeal to intrinsic value—however rhetorically powerful—remains normatively underdetermined. For discussion of value incommensurability and adjudication problems, see Berlin (1969), Raz (1986), and Chang (1997).

8 | CONCLUSIONS AND HUMBLE ADVICE

The Conguillío Statement asserts that ecosystems possess intrinsic value and presents this claim as part of the normative responsibilities of ecologists. The analysis developed in this paper has asked what would be required for that claim to ground binding, universalizable moral duties. Two principal justificatory strategies were considered, and each faces significant difficulties.

On a monist approach, objective intrinsic value must be grounded in morally relevant properties of the sort commonly invoked in contemporary moral theory—sentience, interests, unified welfare, or related capacities. Ecosystems, understood as ecological wholes, do not clearly possess such properties. Without identifying a welfare-bearing subject at the ecosystem level, or revising the grounding conditions of intrinsic value in a way that preserves its duty-generating force, the extensionist route remains philosophically incomplete.

On a pluralist approach, ecosystems might be said to possess intrinsic value on grounds distinct from those that apply to human beings. Yet where multiple irreducible sources of value are affirmed, conflicts between them require principled criteria of adjudication. Absent such criteria, pluralism identifies values but does not determine how those values govern action when they compete—which they will. The attribution of intrinsic value alone does not resolve such conflicts, nor does it specify the relative weight of ecosystem-level and welfare-based considerations. As the rainforest case (Section 2) demonstrates, the difficulty is not abstract disagreement but practical governance: when intrinsic values collide, rhetoric is insufficient. A theory must specify which claims prevail, and why.

The difficulty, therefore, is not merely that philosophers disagree. It is that ecological discourse often moves between distinct conceptions of intrinsic value without clearly marking the shift. In some contexts, "intrinsic value" is used in a modest, attitude-dependent sense: ecosystems are valued for their own sake by individuals or communities. In other contexts, the same term appears to function in a stronger, objective sense—one capable of grounding binding moral duties that apply irrespective of evaluative attitudes. These conceptions differ not only in their metaphysical commitments but in the kind of normative force they purport to generate.

When the weaker conception is in play, the justificatory burden is comparatively light, but the resulting duties are mediated through valuers and limited in scope. When the stronger conception is invoked, a substantial philosophical

defense is required. The difficulty arises when the rhetorical authority of the stronger conception is assumed, while its grounding conditions and normative implications remain unspecified. The term "intrinsic value" can thereby appear to function as a moral trump card, even though its authority depends entirely on which conception is intended.

The issue, then, is not whether ecosystems deserve protection, nor whether ecologists are justified in caring about them for more than instrumental reasons. Many ecologists are motivated by the conviction that ecosystems matter in their own right, and such convictions may be ethically significant. The question is whether the language of intrinsic value has yet been shown capable of bearing the normative weight that is sometimes assigned to it in public and policy-facing discourse.

Careful conservation advocacy requires arguments that can withstand scrutiny within the shared norms of public justification that structure scientific and policy reasoning. Conceptual clarity strengthens rather than weakens environmental commitment (Norton, 1984, 2005; Sagoff, 2008). If intrinsic value is to play a central role in ecological ethics, ecologists must specify whether they mean a subjective, relational, or objective conception—and accept the corresponding philosophical commitments. Until its grounding is made explicit and its implications defended, ***intrinsic value should function as a topic of argument, not as a premise of policy.***

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