

## Who Has Moral Status in the Environment? A Spinozistic Answer

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### Abstract

In this paper I will attempt to answer the question of who or what can have moral status in the environment in the sense that we show direct moral concern and respect toward them. The traditional answer to this question has been anthropocentric, where moral status is ascribed only to human beings, all or some. I shall argue against this position and in favour of a nonanthropocentric position that ascribes moral status to all individual organisms, as well as to certain kinds of supra-individual wholes such as species-populations, ecosystems, and the biosphere as a whole. This corresponds to a combined biocentric and ecocentric position. The argument is constructed in part as a Spinozistic argument using the conceptual apparatus of Baruch Spinoza's systematic philosophy, but it introduces some additional premises as well.

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### The Question of Moral Status

The underlying question to be discussed in this paper is: Who or what can have a moral status in the environment? There are several competing answers to this question, some within a utilitarian framework (e.g., Peter Singer), and some within a deontological

framework (e.g., Tom Regan). There are still other contributions from the viewpoint of virtue ethics (e.g., Rosalind Hursthouse), but this latter approach seems to be less explored than the former two. The present investigation is an attempt in this latter direction. The argument is constructed in part as a Spinozistic argument, and my approach departs to some extent from the consequences Spinoza himself drew from his fundamental premises. I believe, however, that these are the consequences he should have drawn.<sup>1</sup>

The argument proceeds as follows: first, I sketch some competing approaches to the question of moral status, then I outline Spinoza's theory of conation as the descriptive basis for a biocentric and ecocentric conception of moral status and follow with a discussion of the normative relevance of this position. A basic assumption is that our self-conception constitutes the normative basis for either the affirmation or denial of moral status to something. Finally, I consider how environmental virtue ethics can respond to the challenges offered by a combined biocentric and ecocentric position.

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## Different approaches to the question of moral status

By way of introduction I would like to give an overview of the main approaches to the question of moral status. If we look into the history of ethical thinking, we see that this question has been answered in various ways. In classical utilitarianism along the lines of Bentham, we find that moral status is ascribed to all beings included within the scope of the utilitarian principle of maximising happiness, understood as pleasure minus pain for all parties concerned. Here the assumption is that all living beings capable of feeling pleasure and pain should be included in the moral community. Hence, this constitutes the criterion for the ascription of moral status. Within the framework of a deontological ethic based on duties, moral status is ascribed to all subjects to whom we as moral agents have direct duties; and within a deontological ethic based on rights, moral status is ascribed to all subjects with basic rights. According to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948, all human beings are ascribed equal basic rights. This entails an assumption of equal moral status value or inherent dignity.

Nowadays there is much uncertainty and disagreement with regard to the scope of our moral considerations. In this situation, it can be of help to clarify the different alternatives as far as possible before settling for a position. So far, the utilitarian position and the two deontological positions are well worked out within the academic literature. At present,

it seems that the position most in need of clarification is the one grounded in an ethics of virtue. In this connection, it is of interest to observe that the term “environmental virtue ethics” now is becoming established within the field of environmental ethics.<sup>2</sup> I am not aware, however, of anyone who has written on moral status within this frame of reference.

Until now, the prevailing position within Western philosophical and theological thinking about moral status has been anthropocentric. This implies that if nonhuman nature has been ascribed any value at all, it has been mostly instrumental and relative to human ends. The anthropocentric positions confine moral status to humans, all or some, which means that nonhumans to a large extent have been, and still are, excluded from the moral community.

In contrast to these anthropocentric positions, nonanthropocentric positions assume that moral status can be extended to include living organisms other than humans. Within these positions, a rough distinction is often drawn between individualistic and non-individualistic or holistic attempts. The individualistic positions assume that some or all individual organisms can be ascribed moral status, whereas the non-individualistic positions assume that moral status can be extended to include supra-individual wholes such as species and ecosystems. Important contributors to the individualistic position are Peter Singer and Tom Regan. Singer argues that moral status can be ascribed to all sentient beings, and believes a moral distinction can be drawn somewhere between shrimps and oysters,<sup>3</sup> while Regan, on the other hand, maintains that we have good reasons for ascribing moral status to all living beings that can be “subject for a life.” This includes at least all higher mammals and birds.<sup>4</sup> Given the fact that Singer confines moral status to sentient beings, it follows that all non-sentient beings are denied moral status. Regan’s position, moreover, is less inclusive than Singer’s, but more inclusive than an anthropocentric position. Both of these positions ascribe moral status to some but not all nonhumans, and certainly not to plants and micro-organisms, nor to supra-individual wholes.

In addition, there have been attempts to extend the scope of moral status to include all individual living organisms, regardless of whether they are sentient or not. This is usually called a biocentric position. Proponents of this position include Albert Schweitzer, Paul Taylor and more recently, Jon Wetlesen.<sup>5</sup> Also, there have been attempts to extend the scope of moral status to include supra-individual wholes, such as species-populations, ecosystems, and so on. This is commonly called an ecocentric position. Three examples of this are the land-ethic of Aldo

Leopold, Arne Naess's deep ecology ("Ecosophy T"), and the holism of Lawrence Johnson.<sup>6</sup>

All these nonanthropocentric positions represent a progression towards a higher degree of universalism. This pertains both to the individualistic and the holistic attempts. But scarcely any of them, as far as I can see, try to combine these two positions. In what follows, I shall attempt such a combination and I will base my arguments on certain aspects of Spinoza's philosophy. At first glimpse, however, it may appear that Spinoza follows the traditional anthropocentric pattern in Western moral thinking. There are several passages in his main work, *Ethics*, to support this claim.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, as I will argue, the system of Spinoza also allows for a nonanthropocentric ethic. This interpretation can be defended if we distinguish between, on the one hand, those elements in Spinoza's thought that reveal anthropocentric conceptions of moral status, and which all seem to belong to the subordinate parts of his system; and, on the other hand, the more fundamental premises in his system. I argue that the anthropocentric conceptions are not congruent with these fundamental premises. On the contrary, I claim that they give rise to nonanthropocentric conceptions of moral status: partly biocentric and partly ecocentric conceptions.<sup>8</sup>

With this interpretation, I do not claim any inconsistency on the part of Spinoza. Rather, I assume that Spinoza, as with most other people, was formed in part by his society and culture and that this is reflected in the values and norms he endorses. What I want to suggest is that Spinoza, in addition to viewing things under the species of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*), also viewed things under the species of time (*sub specie temporis*).<sup>9</sup> Given the historical dominance of anthropocentrism, it is not unreasonable to assume that this view had some influence on the person of Baruch Spinoza. Accordingly, I wish to consider the many aspects of Spinoza's philosophical system that, taken as a whole, seem to accord with a nonanthropocentric ethic.

Insofar as we are concerned with the history of ideas, it is of interest that Spinoza called his main work *Ethics*. Here it seems he follows the tradition from Aristotle. His book, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, has frequently been, and still is, entitled the *Ethics*. Aristotle used the word *ethos* (with a long e) to describe a person's habits and character traits, as opposed to *ethos* (with a short e), which he used to typify customs and practices. This last meaning of the word was translated into Latin with *mos* (singular), *mores* (plural), which formed the basis for *moralis* and our English word "moral." It seems to me that Spinoza largely follows Aristotle in his ethical outlook in view of the classical question of how we should live if we wish to be happy, and the assumption that

this requires us to develop or form certain types of virtues understood as habits, character traits, attitudes, or dispositions. This classical (holistic) understanding of teleological ethics is different from the consequentialistic type, and also from deontological ethics—both the one based on the will of God, and that based on the autonomous will of man as in Kant’s philosophy.

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### Descriptive similarities in light of Spinoza’s theory of conation

I shall return to this classification of Spinoza’s ethics as holistic teleological at a later stage. But by way of introducing the term “moral status” in relation to Spinoza’s thinking, I shall make the following assumption: Spinoza thinks that we show attitudes of direct moral concern and respect in relation to some things, and not to others. At this point, I introduce the assumption that the former class of things may be ascribed moral status, while the latter class is denied moral status. To be sure, Spinoza himself does not use the term “moral status.” Nevertheless, I think this is a suitable term in this connection with regard to what he makes out of the distinction between natural and artificial things.<sup>10</sup> This distinction can be given a justification in light of Spinoza’s theory of striving or conation.<sup>11</sup> The Latin word for striving is *conatus*, and the historical roots of this term go back to the Stoics in antiquity, as well as to Aristotle’s concept of a teleological striving (*entelecheia*) from potentiality or possibility (*dynamis*) to actuality or reality (*energeia*).

I suppose that the presence or absence of *conatus* in a thing constitutes the factual difference that separates the two classes of things, and that conation can be used as a morally relevant property and a ground for ascribing moral status to all natural things. The assumption is that we adopt an attitude of direct moral concern and respect in relation to natural things, which we then ascribe moral status. We might also adopt an attitude of indirect concern and respect towards artificial things, for instance, towards artificial things that are of importance for beings to whom we ascribe moral status, but even so, we do not ascribe moral status to them. I shall add something more to this argument a little later, but first I would like to say something more about conation as the descriptive basis for a biocentric and ecocentric position on moral status.

With regard to the conation of an individual, one can say that something is in the interest of an organism insofar as it helps or hinders this

organism in its striving to preserve itself. According to Spinoza, each natural thing strives to persevere in its own being. He calls this striving an appetite or need (*appetitus*) whether the thing is conscious of this striving or not; but if the striving is conscious, he calls it a desire (*cupiditas*).<sup>12</sup> In view of this, I shall follow the lead of Paul Taylor and distinguish between two conditions: first, that a thing or organism has an interest in something, and second, that something is in a thing or organism's interest.<sup>13</sup> For all beings comprising the first category, the assumption is that they can be more or less conscious of the factors determining their striving, and so respond with positive or negative feelings of joy or sorrow<sup>14</sup> toward those things that confirm or check their striving. These positive or negative feelings feed back on their striving and determine its direction, and perhaps also its strength toward or away from something. What is more, these feelings determine the desire of the organism to attain whatever is considered to be good and to avoid whatever is considered to be bad.

For all beings comprising the latter category, one can say that something is in an organism's interest even if the organism is not itself conscious of this. It can for example be in a plant's interest to have sunlight, water, minerals, and so on, even if it's not itself conscious of this. If the plant receives all of this, it thrives and blossoms; if it doesn't, it languishes and perishes. Understood in this way, the notion of "interest" is grounded in the notion of *conatus*, or made equivalent with it. According to this analysis, conation constitutes the foundation for a biocentric conception of moral status; it comprises all individual living organisms, which at least includes all higher and lower animals, plants, micro-organisms, and possibly even more things in the a biotic community.<sup>15</sup>

The next challenge is to work out a similar basis for an ecocentric conception of moral status. In view of the preceding argument, I suppose this can be formulated as a question of whether or not we can ascribe a conation to supra-individual wholes such as species, ecosystems etc., on the same basis as with individual organisms. With regard to the aforementioned distinction between natural and artificial things, a positive answer to this question presupposes attaching supra-individual wholes to the class of natural things, while a negative answer presupposes attaching these wholes to the class of artificial things. Given that this last option denies moral status to supra-individual wholes, I shall assume that they belong to the class of natural things, and with certain qualifications can be ascribed a conation and moral status.<sup>16</sup>

As far as the descriptive part of this argument is concerned, it partly acquires inspiration from ecological thinking. Within ecology there is an assumption that nature can be viewed as a network of systems that is hierarchically structured. Smaller systems function within the framework of bigger systems, from organisms downwards to organs, cells, molecules, and atoms, and from organisms upwards to species-populations, ecosystems, the biosphere, the planetary system around our sun, the galaxy, and the group of galaxies. At least some of these systems may perhaps be ascribed a conation of their own, and be understood as cybernetic systems. If we return to Spinoza, I believe we find similar observations concerning nature's networks of systems. Spinoza has what in recent times has been called a "holographic" understanding of nature.<sup>17</sup> In his physics, he develops a theory of simple and composed individuals that is very much in agreement with modern systems theory.<sup>18</sup> According to this view, the world can be characterized in terms of "systems" or "holons," where each individual or system is a "whole" that is more than the sum of its parts, but also itself a "part" of larger individuals or systems.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, nature's parts can be thought of as homeostatic systems that maintain nature's stability and sustainability with the help of internal interactions.<sup>20</sup> These internal interactions steer the preservation of the system as a whole, but the system's equilibrium can nevertheless be weakened by external causes (e.g., by human interference), with the result that these external causes feed back on the system (cf. feedback loop) and constitute a co-determining factor for the system's future direction and strength. In view of this, I think one can say that something is in such a system's interest insofar as it helps or hinders the system's ability to maintain it self, that is, preserve diversity and stability. Also, it can be said to be in an ecosystem's interest that its single units or parts collaborate and that, if they do so, it maintains the system's stability, but if it fails, the system collapses. The same seems to apply to the biosphere as a whole.

The question now is whether we can say something similar with regard to species-populations. One possible answer is that there are factors that co-determine whether or not a species-population is able to preserve itself in the environment. It can undergo great damage and nevertheless maintain or rebuild its population, but if the damages become too severe, it might be unrepairable and result in the species dying out. Here we should note that we of course cannot injure a species-population without at the same time injuring some or all of the individual organisms that make up the population. Likewise, we can fulfil the criteria set out from the viewpoint of environmental protection (or protection of supra-individual wholes) without fulfilling those set

out from the viewpoint of animal protection (or protection of individual living organisms). Here the assumption is that, insofar as one doesn't push a system further than its limits for sustainability, this gives no protection for the individuals being killed. This argument is often used as a justification for handing out catch quotas in fisheries and the sealing and whaling industries.

As regards conation and its range of application, I suppose something can be said to be in a certain species-population's interest in that it supports or checks the species' ability to maintain the population. If it succeeds in doing so the species is sustainable, or at least survives; if it fails, the species is extinguished.<sup>21</sup> In sum, I argue that Spinoza's concept of conation contains a reasonably wide class of natural things so as to include all individual living organisms. What is more, it also includes some or all homeostatic and cybernetic systems, such as species, ecosystems, the ecosphere and biosphere as a whole—and perhaps several other things in the environment with relevant structures that seek self-maintenance, such as habitats, landscapes, and so on.

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### Should moral status be understood as intrinsic or inherent value?

The notion of moral status presupposes the notion of “moral status value.” There are two terms that are commonly used in this connection: “intrinsic value” and “inherent value.” Unfortunately, there is no uniform usage of these terms in the environmental literature: some commentators use intrinsic value where others use inherent value.<sup>22</sup> Traditionally, however, there has been a tendency to apply the term intrinsic value to an object when it makes sense to do something for this object's own sake. In contrast to intrinsic value, there is instrumental value, which refers to the kind of value an object is ascribed in relation to its usefulness for human ends.

Furthermore, intrinsic value has been used within a teleological ethic, but differently within a consequentialistic and a holistic teleological ethic.<sup>23</sup> In a consequentialistic teleological ethic the assumption is that only the fruits or results of our actions can have value in themselves, whereas in a holistic teleological ethic the assumption is that actions can have value in themselves insofar as they are motivated by virtue. As regards inherent value, this term has usually been used within a deontological ethic. In a duty-based ethic, one assumes that moral agents have direct moral duties against those subjects that are ascribed moral status. These duties can be used to ground the subject's rights.



But in a right-based ethic, the argument goes the other way around. Here the assumption is that these subjects have certain rights, and that these rights are correlated with other agents' direct duties.

As regards the notions of intrinsic and inherent value, they do not appear in the system of Spinoza. Seemingly, this offers a problem with regard to the application of modern ethical terminology to his thought. Still, I think there is a way out of this dilemma. As mentioned earlier, I take Spinoza's ethics to be of the holistic teleological kind, where the concept of virtue or power (*virtus*)<sup>24</sup> is held to be a requirement for the realization of the highest good and most final goal. Indeed, it may also be characterized as an ethics of virtue parallel to that of Aristotle. According to Spinoza, the highest good and most final goal of human striving is the attainment of blessedness (*beatitudo*), understood as freedom (*libertas*) or self-determination.<sup>25</sup> Insofar as a person is able to achieve this freedom, he or she will form and develop what Spinoza calls active affects or desires (virtues), such as fortitude (*fortitudo*) and intellectual love of God (*amor intellectualis Dei*).<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, these effects or virtues form the basis for the development of certain kinds of attitudes or dispositions. Now if we assume, for the sake of the argument ahead, that these virtues consist of attitudes expressing respect and concern for something, then I believe we can make the further assumption that those things, toward which these attitudes are taken in a direct manner, are ascribed moral status. But there is still the problem of how moral status is to be understood in this connection—as an intrinsic or as an inherent value. Some might object at this point on the grounds that this is a somewhat trivial problem: it doesn't make an important difference whether we use the term intrinsic value or inherent value. However, in light of the widespread and often diverse use of these terms, it will be useful to attempt to clarify them somewhat more. Allow me, therefore, to make an effort to do so with the anticipation that it will be useful for the reconstruction of Spinoza.

Despite the fact that inherent value has been used within a deontological ethic, and intrinsic value within a teleological ethic,<sup>27</sup> along with the fact that Spinoza's ethics is of the teleological kind, I shall attempt to maintain a distinction between intrinsic and inherent value, but in such a way that they may be combined. Consider, therefore, the following argument. Insofar as a thing is ascribed a value in itself by a person, it has intrinsic value; but insofar as a certain agreement exists on the thing's value among a group of persons, and this belief is institutionalized in the group, the thing is ascribed an inherent value as a moral status value.<sup>28</sup> From the viewpoint of Spinoza's teleological ethic, moral status is introduced in relation to

persons' attitudes of direct concern and respect, and ascribed to those beings that these attitudes are taken in relation to. These beings are then ascribed intrinsic value. But insofar as a group of persons reach an agreement on the being's intrinsic value, this will contribute to transforming this intrinsic value into an inherent moral status value. This inherent value is then ascribed to those beings which have a conation or striving, and it is ascribed to these beings in their own right. In this way, the norm of moral status is internalized intrapersonally within each person and institutionalized interpersonally among these persons as a common praxis. On this view, moral status incorporates both intrinsic value and inherent value.

Furthermore, I recommend that we distinguish between two types of factors in connection with the ascription of moral status value. First, the relation to the valuing subject, for example, one who ascribes intrinsic value to certain things;<sup>29</sup> and second, these things' factual or subvenient properties that are considered to be normatively relevant. If these properties are considered to be necessary conditions, things lacking them (that is, which are believed by the person to lack them), are denied moral status. If the properties are considered to be sufficient conditions, then things that have them (that is, which are believed by the person to have them), are ascribed moral status. Thus, a distinction is made between a thing having certain factual properties (or is thought to have certain factual properties), and the fact that these properties are considered to be normatively or morally relevant for the ascription of moral status. With regard to the latter, these factual properties (conation) can be said to be subvenient, while the normative terms, such as moral status, are supervenient.

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## The Question of Normative Relevance

So far the argument has focused on the descriptive factors of relevance for a theory of moral status. According to Spinoza's theory of conation, all individual organisms as well as some or all supra-individual wholes such as ecosystems, species-populations, and so on, can be ascribed a conation of their own. This is relevant to a combined biocentric and ecocentric conception of moral status. Still, the normative or moral relevance of such a position remains to be determined. We might ask in what way the conation or interests of individual organisms and supra-individual wholes can make any moral claims on us, or how we do determine whether a property, such as conation, is morally relevant or not.

In the case of Spinoza, the hypothesis is that conation is both a necessary and sufficient condition for the ascription of moral status. This implies making a descriptive assumption as to the existence of this striving, and a normative assumption as to the moral relevance of this property. However, in order to determine the moral relevance of an individual's conation or striving, we need an argument that does not proceed strictly from a set of descriptive premises to a normative conclusion. Rather, we need one that proceeds from at least one normative premise to a normative conclusion. From the point of view of modern ethics, this is a familiar problem; however, I am glad to notice that Christine Korsgaard recently has proposed an interesting theory for its solution.<sup>30</sup> Korsgaard's answer takes the form of a "theory of reflective endorsement," where the assumption is that certain factual properties (such as conation) are normatively relevant grounds for the ascription of moral status insofar as these properties correspond with conceptions of practical personal identity. What sort of practical personal identity one has depends on what one has cognitively identified and affectively attached oneself to—in other words, what one has endorsed.<sup>31</sup>

Let us suppose that a person identifies himself with his sex, his race, his skin colour, his language, his religion, his political opinions, his nation, his social heritage, his property, and so on. In this case, the person will be disposed to recognize these properties as morally relevant grounds for an equal treatment of those individuals who possess these properties, and for a differential treatment of those who lack them. This leads to a particularistic attitude. On the other hand, suppose that a person simply identifies herself with her own conation or striving, which is a common characteristic of all living beings, individual organisms as well as supra-individual wholes. In this case, the person will be disposed to recognize this property as a morally relevant ground for extending her attitudes of direct moral concern and respect to all natural things, including animals, plants, micro-organisms, and ecosystems. This leads to a universalist attitude.

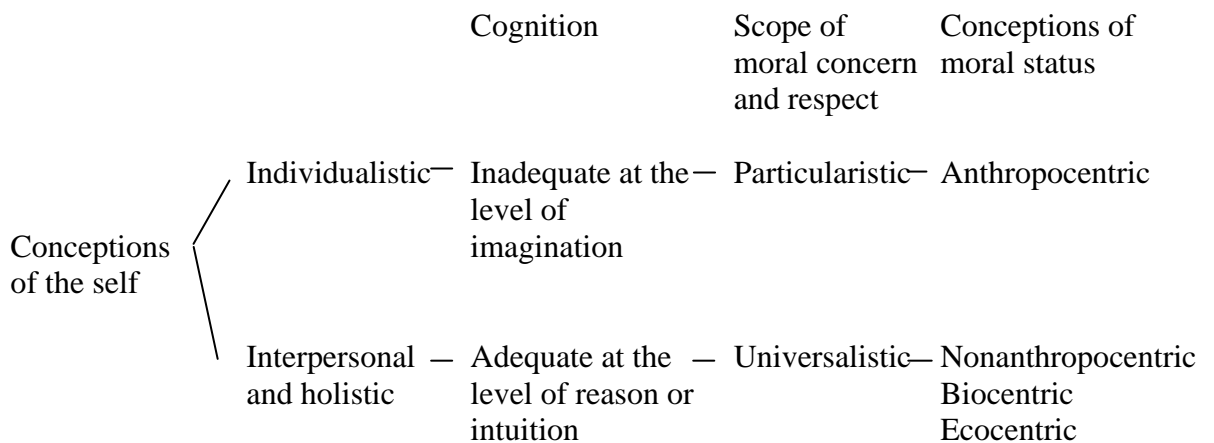
In my opinion, this approach to normativity has a lot to offer in the sense of determining the sources of our moral values and norms. In fact, I believe a similar kind of endorsement theory is tacitly assumed in Spinoza's system and may be reconstructed from it. Spinoza himself has some interesting things to say of relevance for such a theory, but he does not go into it in great detail. What he does say, however, appears to have a great potential in determining the sources of normativity. Partly inspired by Korsgaard, I will now go on to outline some of Spinoza's premises which I think harmonize with a kind of reflective endorsement theory, and which ultimately have relevance for the

question at hand, namely how we determine the normative relevance of a biocentric and ecocentric position on moral status. Instead of Korsgaard’s term “practical personal identity,” I shall be using the terms “self-concept” and “self-conception” to signify the sources of normativity.

### The concept of “self” in Spinoza

Crucial to the understanding of Spinoza’s philosophy is his concept of striving or conation. This concept has a universal range of application that goes all the way from individual things, such as living organisms, to supra-individual wholes such as ecosystems. If we confine ourselves to persons, we find that conation clearly has reference to a self; hence, the central question becomes what kind of self or self-conception we have. This is an important point, since our self-conception in the following will form the basis for either the affirmation or denial of moral status to something.

Based on a careful reading of Spinoza’s philosophy, I shall attempt to reconstruct two conceptions of the self as follows: one individualistic self-conception at the level of the first kind of cognition; and one interpersonal and holistic self-conception at the level of the second or third kind of cognition. Before proceeding with the argument, let me exemplify these conceptions of the self and their bearing on the question of moral status in the following diagram.



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## An individualistic conception of the self

Suppose I form and develop an individualistic self-conception. This individualistic self-concept will depend on what Spinoza calls the first kind of cognition (*cognitionem primi generis*), at the level of opinion (*opinionem*) and imagination (*imaginationem*).<sup>32</sup> The first kind of cognition is inadequate and entails a partial and fragmented conception of God, oneself, and other things. This fragmented conception of God involves an ignorance of the fact that each individual or mode (*modus*) is an expression of God's essence or nature.<sup>33</sup> It also entails an ignorance of the fact that God's essence is the internal cause of the essence of each mode, insofar as these essences are understood as eternal truths. According to Spinoza, God's power or existence is the internal cause of the existence or striving of each mode or individual being.<sup>34</sup>

Essential to the metaphysics of Spinoza is, moreover, the distinction between two aspects of God or nature: the creative or generating nature (*natura naturans*), and the created or generated nature (*natura naturata*).<sup>35</sup> I consider this distinction to be of relevance to Spinoza's ethical outlook. Insofar as it is interpreted as a unity/diversity relation, God will function as the internal unity (*natura naturans*) in nature as a whole (*natura naturata*), as well as in each single part. Moreover, the term God refers to that which is in itself and is conceived through itself—a substance—and it is argued that God is absolutely infinite. And since God is absolutely infinite, God must be indivisible, and as God is the cause of itself as well as of the modes, God must be equally present in all its effects and totally present in parts and in whole. This has the further implication that the modes are only modally and not substantially separate from each other, and so they must be internally united through God as their common internal cause. On this interpretation, I believe Spinoza becomes a panentheist rather than a pantheist, as it is often assumed—all modes are present in God and God is present in all the modes.

By way of this analysis, we may now determine more concretely the normative relevance of these premises. Insofar as I have an inadequate cognition of God, I will form and develop an inadequate conception of myself. Inasmuch as I do this, I will be ignorant of the fact that I have this internal relation to nature as a whole.<sup>36</sup> This implies that, as a

person, I will have an external rather than an internal relation to the other modes or parts. As it is, however, I may have an internal relation to some parts, for example to my family and friends, the members of my religion, or to the class of human beings. But, given the inadequacy of my cognition, it is unlikely that I will have this kind of internal relation to the whole of nature—the reason being that inadequate cognition merely brings about identification with fragments of what it means to be a person. Such fragments can include the ability to be a moral person or a moral agent, to have a rational faculty and a free will, and so on, but these abilities are hardly exhaustive of me as a person.

If we turn to the biological classification of Aristotle, this can perhaps be illustrated as follows: Insofar as I have an inadequate cognition of myself, I will only come to identify with the rational (*lógos*) part of my soul (*psuchê*), which specifically belongs to human beings. But apart from the rational part, I have the appetitive (*tò epithumetikòn*) part in common with animals, and the vegetative (*tò phutikòn*) or nourishing (*tò threptikòn*) part in common with plants. These abilities belong to the irrational (*alagos*) part of my soul. Those abilities that I have in common with animals are, therefore, together with conation or striving, also the capacity for perception, movement, and so on. In common with plants, I have the ability for striving, such as nourishing, growth, and reproduction.<sup>37</sup> This, I believe, is more or less in accordance with the premises associated with Spinoza's theory of conation outlined earlier.<sup>38</sup>

From these premises, we may surmise that a requirement for showing attitudes of direct moral concern and respect towards others is a sense of identification with the abilities and properties that these beings have in common with us. Descriptively, I supposedly have no properties in common with other living beings; normatively, this negation of any affiliation with nonhumans takes on a moral relevance insofar as it is endorsed as part of my self-conception. Consequently, I will ascribe moral status (intrinsic value) to those parts to which I have an internal relation, and I will deny moral status (or ascribe instrumental value) to those parts to which I have an external relation. The former class of parts become the objects of direct moral concern and respect, whereas the latter class merely become the objects of indirect moral concern and respect. Subsequently, in my individualistic self-conception, there will be divisibility between the parts, and the assumption is that I shall not be motivated to promote the welfare or interests of those parts or living beings to which I have this kind of external relation—at least not if the welfare of these beings conflict with my own welfare, or the pursuing of my own interests.

Based on the foregoing analysis, I argue that if I develop an individualistic conception of myself, then I will be disposed to accept an anthropocentric conception of moral status.

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### An interpersonal and holistic conception of the self

Suppose instead that I form and develop an interpersonal and holistic self-conception. This self-conception will have its ultimate source in what Spinoza calls reason (*ratio*), corresponding to the second kind of cognition (*cognitio secundi generis*), or intuition (*scientia intuitiva*) corresponding to the third kind of cognition (*cognitio tertii generis*). Both the second and third kinds of cognition are adequate and involve a complete or total understanding of God or nature.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to the individualistic self-conception of inadequate cognition, this adequate cognition implies that the more I understand myself in relation to God or nature, the more I understand myself as internally related to all other modes or parts through our common internal cause, which is God or the eternal and infinite substance.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, I will not only understand myself as part of a particular group (e.g., my family, political party, nation, class of humans etc.), but as internally connected with all other parts of nature as a whole. Insofar as I come to develop this kind of understanding, I will have a deeper notion of myself as internally related to all of nature's parts, and this will imply indivisibility. Since God is absolutely infinite and indivisible, God must be equally present in all its effects, and equally present in the part as in the whole. In developing an interpersonal holism of this kind, I come to form an internal relation to each of nature's parts as well as to nature as a whole. "The more we understand particular things, the more we understand God."<sup>41</sup> In so doing, I develop my conception of myself through a process of identification with the other parts and, by means of this identification, I am able to incorporate the other parts into my conception of myself at a deeper level of self-understanding.

Furthermore, we may compare with this notion of interpersonal holism the field theoretical understanding of the organism as a "hologram" as held by David Bohm.<sup>42</sup> According to Bohm, each field is considered to be infinite, each part of the universe that we isolate and identify conceptually, is part of a field that is infinite and indivisible. On this view, fragmentation is a conceptual construct that can only have conventional validity. The ontological reality is the interconnectedness

of all “parts” of the field. What this suggests is that, if I am able to achieve an internal relation to one part of this field, then my relation to this part will involve a relation to the whole. Thus, it is indivisibility at the deepest level—positively separating Spinoza’s holism from every type of atomistic conception of the parts. In contrast to the atomists, Spinoza does not assume that this analysis ends in the smallest indivisible parts. Where an analysis of parts should end is in fact a practical question, and any answer to it will have only conventional validity.

So, by means of this interpersonal and holistic self-understanding, I will ascribe intrinsic value to those parts that have an internal relation to me. Descriptively, I have a number of properties in common with other living beings; normatively, these properties take on a moral relevance in that they are endorsed as part of my self-conception. Insofar as I recognize a basic similarity between myself and other individuals in terms of a conation or striving, I will have normative grounds for treating these individuals in a relevant equal manner. My self-concept will then be used as a ground for a normative prescription: To desire for others what I desire for myself.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, inasmuch as this desire (*fortitudo*) is anchored in my intuitive understanding under the viewpoint of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*), I will be motivated by an intellectual love of God (*amor intellectualis Dei*) and towards each mode or part as myself (*amor erga proximum*).<sup>44</sup> Indeed, by partaking in this love of God, I will have a deeper sense of identification with the needs and wants of all beings or modes. Through this identification, I obtain an attitude of direct concern and respect for the integrity and self-determination of an individual organism or system, including permitting it to function spontaneously in accordance with its own nature. What is more, to have direct concern and respect for another being is to accept that that being has moral status, a value in its own right. To express this concern and respect is to act towards those beings so as to convey my recognition of that value.

From the above remarks it follows that I will have a more universalistic and inclusive self-understanding, and one that necessarily forms the basis for a nonanthropocentric conception of moral status. Moreover, insofar as a group of persons all share this interpersonal and holistic self-conception, and each person cognizes that the other persons cognize and recognize a biocentric and ecocentric position of moral status, and everyone agrees to the recognition of such a position, this will contribute to convert or transform this intrinsic value into an inherent moral status value. On this view, the moral validity of the norm of moral status can be said to be relative to the recognition of this norm within a group of persons.<sup>45</sup>



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## How should environmental virtue ethics respond to the problem of conflicts of interest?

So far, I have not discussed the problems raised by a combination of biocentrism and ecocentrism. Some would say that by arguing for such a position, we necessarily face some difficult tasks with regard to the resolution of conflicts of interest. Personally, I think some of this concern is warranted; however, as I shall argue, there is room for optimism on the part of environmental virtue ethics.

Let me first point out a frequent problem facing this combined position. According to ecocentrism, the basic criterion for right action is the tendency of the action to preserve ecological integrity in the environment in which the action takes place. But such a holistic view incorporates no assumption that we have responsibility toward individual living organisms, each of which is regarded as possessing moral status. Since we aim at a combination of biocentrism and ecocentrism, whenever we cause harm to individual organisms, such as animals and plants, recognition must be given to the fact that our treatment of them is morally problematic.

It remains to decide how these competing claims are to be resolved, if possible. For my part, I am somewhat hesitant when it comes to finding straightforward solutions to such conflicts of interest. From the point of view of Spinoza's holism, however, I suppose our main choice of concern will be determined by how we understand the relation between part and whole. If we understand the single parts as more than parts of a whole, then we will probably give our support to a biocentric position. If, on the other hand, we understand the parts only in terms of their function within the whole, then we are most likely to give our support to an ecocentric position. In any case, we may ask whether supra-individual wholes, such as an ecosystem, have intrinsic properties that are not inherited from their parts alone, or if they merely have the properties inherited from their various parts? In the former case such wholes are considered to be more than the sum of their parts, whereas in the latter case they are mere sums of parts. We need not here provide a general answer to the problem of reductionism; still, from the earlier discussions on cybernetic and homeostatic systems, I believe it is reasonable to assume that there is a sense in which such wholes are more than the sum of their parts. Similarly, I believe we can infer that

individual organisms are more than mere parts of supra-individual wholes. These individual organisms are not ascribed a moral status value on account of their function as parts of a whole. Rather, they are ascribed this value for their intrinsic properties in terms of a striving or conation. This striving can thus not be reduced to a mere functioning of the striving of the whole of which the organism is a part.

Given that we recognize the moral status of individual organisms, species-populations and ecosystems, the task of reconciling the interests of all parties concerned necessarily becomes problematic. I have to submit that this position is morally demanding, and some answers may be better than others; yet, no theory alone is adequate to settle every conflict of interest. These competing claims are of such a complex nature that no solution by reference to any single principle alone will suffice. With that in mind, I recommend that we consider more closely the prospective of environmental virtue ethics. The strength of this approach lies in the fact that it emphasizes the importance of forming and developing attitudes and dispositions that enable us to have direct concern and respect for others, rather than attempt to formulate norms or policies for every conceivable situation. From this point of view, the formulations of norms or guiding lines become a secondary issue, dependent upon our ability to form and develop relevant attitudes and dispositions. Our attitudes of direct concern and respect for persons and individual organisms are grounded on their ability for striving or conation, their capacity to experience pain and happiness, enjoy success and suffer affliction.<sup>46</sup> With regard to supra-individual wholes, the case is a similar one. Our direct concern and respect for the welfare and self-determination of the parties concerned are grounded on their ability to sustain and reproduce—from which, in the end, both we and other living beings may benefit.

On account of this, we may desire not to cause avoidable harm to other beings, or we may desire to actively contribute to preventing avoidable harm being caused to other beings—or generally to promote the welfare of others as far as possible. A basic question, however, concerns which human ends and needs justify depriving other humans and nonhumans of the opportunity to pursue their essential interests and thereby to satisfy their vital needs. In the present situation, it is apparent that human peripheral needs and interests are given priority over the essential or vital needs and interests of other humans and nonhumans. A case in point is the meat-eating culture, which ultimately affects humans and animals as well as the ecological balance of ecosystems, species, and the biosphere as a whole.

My assumption is that, by acknowledging the moral status of nonhumans, we will be liable to renounce our nonbasic needs and interests if the pursuing of these needs and interests presuppose the suffering, or even death, of nonhumans. In fact, if we were to fulfil those needs and interests, it would imply recognizing the mere instrumental value of these beings. But through recognition of the moral status value of living beings, we naturally give up several of those needs that are no longer essential for our welfare, and by way of this attitude we give priority to the sort of values that do not come into conflict with the basic needs and interests of others. Possibly, this will form the basis for life forms which, according to Arne Naess, are “rich in means and simple in ends,” or which, according to Duane Elgin, are “outwardly simple and inwardly rich.”<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, as human beings, we must eat in order to survive, and so it is necessary for us to take the lives of nonhumans. Since it is impossible for us to avoid harming other living beings, we are forced to make some essential value choices and priorities. For my part, I am committed to the view that, if we accept that animals have a higher moral standing than plants, then we may well be committed to a life as vegetarians. In the end, it is how we conceive ourselves as human beings that will determine our value priorities. However, a shift from meat-eating to vegetarianism will be of substantial value to the welfare of both individual organisms and for the preservation and sustainability of ecosystems, species-populations and the biosphere as a whole.

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## Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have raised the question of who or what can have moral status in the environment and have argued for a combined biocentric and ecocentric answer in light of Spinoza’s philosophy. This position does not follow from the underlying anthropocentric premises in Spinoza’s thinking, but from the more fundamental premises, which give rise to nonanthropocentric conceptions of moral status, partly biocentric, and partly ecocentric. What is the moral relevance of this position?

I have argued for a virtue ethics approach to this problem, where the crucial point is how we conceive of ourselves as human beings. Insofar as we form and develop an interpersonal and holistic conception of ourselves, we will acknowledge that there are certain similarities between ourselves and other beings, such as a striving for self-

preservation. Moreover, we will endorse this ability as part of our self-conception, and thus have reasons for recognizing their normative relevance as grounds for extending moral status from ourselves to other living organisms, species-populations, ecosystems, and the biosphere as a whole. The recognition of such a position will no doubt contribute to upgrading the nonhuman nature from being mere objects with instrumental value to being parts of our moral community and worthy of our moral consideration.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> I use the following abbreviations when referring to Spinoza's *Ethics*: Df – *definitio*, e.g.: 1Df1 – part 1, definition 1; Ex – *explicatio*, e.g.: 1Df6Ex – explanation to definition 6 in part 1; A – *axioma*, e.g.: 1A1 – part 1, axiom 1; P – *propositio*, e.g.: 1P1 – part 1, proposition 1; D – *Demonstratio*, e.g.: 1P1D – demonstration to proposition 1 in part 1; S – *scholium*, e.g.: 1P8S1 – the first scholium after proposition 8 in part 1; C – *corollarium*, e.g.: 1P6C – the corollary after proposition 6 in part 1; App – *appendix*, e.g.: 1App – appendix to part 1; Pr – *praefatio*, e.g.: 4Pr – preface to part 4; AppCap – *appendicis caput*, first chapter in the appendix to part 4, e.g.: 4AppCap1.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. the issue of the journal *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 8 (2) (2001) which contain articles exploring different aspects of “environmental virtue ethics.” Also see Philip Cafaro & Ronald Sandler (eds.) *Environmental Virtue Ethics*. New York: Rowan and Littlefield (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Singer, P. (1975), p. 174.

<sup>4</sup> Regan, T. (1983), p. 243–248.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, P. (1986) and Wetlesen, J. (1999).

<sup>6</sup> Leopold, A. (1949); Naess, A. (1983); and Johnson, L. (1991).

<sup>7</sup> The central passages in this connection are 4P37S1, AppCap7, 13 & 26 where Spinoza's statements are thoroughly anthropocentric.

<sup>8</sup> I note that G. Lloyd (1999) is critical to this line of approach in relation to Spinoza's texts. She argues that Spinoza's philosophy, in spite of being a source of inspiration for several philosophers and others, is not suitable as a basis for an environmental ethic. Her problem is, however, that she seems to confuse the terms “anthropocentric”

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with “anthropogenic.” An environmental ethic is necessarily always generated by human beings; hence, it must be anthropogenic. But an environmental ethic can be anthropogenic without being anthropocentric. I believe Lloyd is correct in denying that Spinoza can be taken as a patron for an environmental ethic. Nonetheless, his ethical thinking can be an immense source of inspiration and interpretation, such as for me and others. This seems also to be the case with Naess (1999). Naess devotes an entire article to answering some of Lloyd’s arguments. I subscribe in large part to the objections Naess makes in that article. See also Naess (1977); Mathews (1991), p. 77–84, 87–90, 109–112 and 150–153; and Collier (1999) for other attempts to bring Spinoza in line with environmental philosophy. Moreover, it is interesting that Spinoza appears in the book by Joy A. Palmer (ed.) (2001) *Fifty key thinkers on the Environment* (London, Routledge).

<sup>9</sup> Cp. 4P4 and 4AppCap7.

<sup>10</sup> Spinoza uses the terms *res singulares* (singular things) and *res particulares* (particular things) as common terms for all “things.” I have found 12 occurrences of *rei singularis* (singular), 17 occurrences of *res singulares* (plural), and 2 occurrences of *res particulares* in the *Ethics*.

<sup>11</sup> Cp. 3P6–7, 9S, 11S and 13S.

<sup>12</sup> 3P9S.

<sup>13</sup> I develop this distinction partly with reference to Paul Taylor’s distinction in Taylor (1986), p. 63, and partly with reference to Spinoza, especially 3P6–7 and 9S.

<sup>14</sup> 3P11S.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that Freya Matthews (1991), much inspired by Spinoza I would guess, makes a case for the ascription of a conatus to supra-individual wholes but, as far as I can see, she doesn’t apply this term to species-populations.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that ideational possibilities (on the way to understanding God) are not so “evenly distributed” across conating beings, nor across individuals and wholes. In the present paper, I will not attempt to show in what way complex wholes have ideas. For my purposes it will suffice merely to assume that they have a conation or striving.

<sup>17</sup> An interesting book in this connection is *The Holographic Paradigm and Other Paradoxes* by Ken Wilber (1982).

<sup>18</sup> 2P13S.

<sup>19</sup> 2P13SL7. There is probably something to gain from a more detailed comparison between Spinoza’s ideas and modern ecological thinking on this point, but I shall leave that to one side at present.

<sup>20</sup> Cp. Sayre, K. M (1976), ch. 3, 4, and 6 in connection with feedback and cybernetic systems. Relevant for holistic positions is also the contributions by Lovelock,(1979), p. ix–x, on the biosphere as a self-regulating and homeostatic system, and p. 48ff on cybernetic systems; and Rolston (1988) ch. 4–5.

<sup>21</sup> We may note that it sometimes is to the advantage of a certain species that its individual organisms are killed, a case in point being game management. We cannot pursue this discussion here but for further reference on relevant literature, see Lawrence Johnson’s holistic position, ascribing interests to species and ecosystems etc. See Johnson (1991), ch. 4 p. 148ff, 156, 157, 178ff; ch. 6 p. 202ff, 209, 216–217,

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218ff; ch. 7 p. 238, 239 and p. 255–257. In addition, see Shaw (1997) p. 53–67, who maintains that ecosystems, such as rainforests inhabit a *telos* in the Aristotelian sense of the term.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Taylor (1986) uses the term “inherent worth” instead of the more commonly used “inherent value.” Presumably one could also use “inherent dignity” as is commonly used in connection with human rights and human worth. With regard to the terms “instrumental value,” “intrinsic value,” and “inherent value,” I think Jon Wetlesen has done a significant effort in attempting to clarify these concepts and his contribution is highly recommendable. See Wetlesen (1996) p. 61–87.

<sup>23</sup> As far as the distinction between “consequencialistic-teleological ethic” and “holistic-teleological ethic” goes, I follow Wetlesen (1996).

<sup>24</sup> 4Df8.

<sup>25</sup> Cp. 1Df7 in combination with 2P11C and 5P42 & D & S.

<sup>26</sup> 3P59S and 5P36.

<sup>27</sup> This pertains to Regan (1983); Taylor (1986); and Wetlesen (1999).

<sup>28</sup> Cp. Theodore Newcomb’s three criteria for agreement or consensus: (1) Each person cognizes and recognizes certain norms; (2) each person cognizes that the other concerned parties cognizes and recognizes these norms; (3) everyone agrees to this recognition of norms, that is, that they all agree on them. Moral agreement or validity can thus be said to rest on all parties cognizing that everyone recognizes the norms at stake. See Newcomb (1966) p. 94ff, 222–225, and 226–246.

<sup>29</sup> 3P9S and 4Pr.

<sup>30</sup> See Korsgaard (1996) ch. 2 & 4. Her theory of reflective endorsement is also successfully applied by Wetlesen (1999).

<sup>31</sup> In fact, the theory of reflective endorsement as outlined here has a lot in common with Arne Naess’s theory of self-identification or theory of ecological self-realization (identification as a source of deep ecological attitudes). According to Naess, the more one comes to identify with nature and its parts, the more one will be motivated to protect nature and its constituting parts.

<sup>32</sup> 2P35, 40S2 and 41.

<sup>33</sup> 1Df5.

<sup>34</sup> 1P8, 13, 15, 19S, 20 & C1, 24 & C, 25 & S & C, 26, 29, 34, 36, 2P3S, 45S, 3P1D, and 5A2.

<sup>35</sup> 2P29S.

<sup>36</sup> 2P47.

<sup>37</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1, 13 & 6, 2.

<sup>38</sup> This pertains especially to 3P6–7 and 9S.

<sup>39</sup> 2P40S2. In spite of important differences between the second and third kind of cognition, I will not make a case of these here. This would demand a more thorough investigation into the system of Spinoza than is necessary for the present argument. Thus, interpersonal holism refers to both the second (reason) and third (intuition) kinds of cognition.



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<sup>40</sup> The central passages supporting this view are 1Df3 & 5, A1 & 2, P13 & 15.

<sup>41</sup> 5P24

<sup>42</sup> See Weber (1985) p. 35–104, and especially p. 78–83. I am grateful to Jon Wetlesen for mentioning this similarity between Spinoza and Bohm.

<sup>43</sup> Cp. 4P37: “The good which every man, who follows after virtue, desires for himself he will also desire for other men, and so much the more, in proportion as he has a greater understanding of God.” In this proposition Spinoza only mentions humans as being the objects of direct moral concern. But according to the present interpretation the hypothesis is that, insofar as the person has an adequate self-understanding, this normative prescription will apply to nonhumans too. So, while Spinoza’s statement in 4P37 is strictly anthropocentric, I claim that the fundamental premises in his system allows for a different, nonanthropocentric interpretation.

<sup>44</sup> 2P11C, 40S2, 45S, 3P59S, 5P23S, 29D & S, 36S, 37 and 42 & S.

<sup>45</sup> This consensus or agreement on norms follows from Spinoza’s theory of integration or harmony in part 4 of the *Ethics* (4P18, 29–37). The basic assumption here is that, insofar as a group of persons all have adequate cognition and active affects, they will converge in nature (*convenire in natura*) in the sense of agreement on the values and norms of reason, including the norm of moral status. This may serve as grounds for a recognition theory of moral validity along the lines developed by Jürgen Habermas in his discourse ethics, and Karl-Otto Apel in his transcendental pragmatics. For my own part, I think these and other approaches to moral validity may be of use for those interested in a shift from anthropocentrism to nonanthropocentrism. However, to spell out the further implications of this would take us too far afield here. For an argument in this direction, see Wetlesen (1999), who explicitly draws on modern discourse ethics and the rhetoric of Aristotle in his casuistic argument for a biocentric conception of moral status.

<sup>46</sup> Of course, in the case of human beings or persons, our attitudes of direct concern and respect are grounded on our ability to reason or make rational choices and valuations in addition to the mere ability to strive and feel joy or sorrow.

<sup>47</sup> See Naess, (1989) and Elgin (1993).