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## Unprojected Value, Unfathomed Caves and Unspent Nature: Reply to an Editorial

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### ABSTRACT

This article replies to Alan Holland's challenge to reconcile belief in non-anthropogenic intrinsic value with the poetry of John Clare and its projection onto nature of human feelings, and thus with projective humanism. However, in literature and broadcasts, feelings are found projected upon buildings and belongings as well as upon natural creatures. This and the fact that many living creatures (such as the Northamptonshire species *not* remarked by Clare) never become objects of human projections but still remain valuable suggests that the basis of natural value lies elsewhere, at least in part. Such themes, together with that of nature's independent value, are variously illustrated from poems of Gray, Cowper and Marvell, and from expressions of nature's otherness in the Christian verse of Hopkins (who also helps answer Holland's further question concerning 'what we have lost'), and in the pantheistic (or pagan) prose of Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*. In none of these writers does the value of nature depend on the projection of a humanistic sensitivity, but in different ways on the nature (diversely conceptualised) of natural creatures themselves.

### KEYWORDS

Humanistic projections, non-anthropogenic value, intrinsic value, undiscovered species, nature's significance

Alan Holland's recent Editorial (this journal, 13.4) criticises talk of intrinsic value, plus accounts of this value that represent it as independent of human valuing. He suggests that from this standpoint it is difficult if not impossible to account for the sensitivity towards nature of the nineteenth-century English poet, John Clare, who wrote of the heron's 'melancholy wing' and of 'Coy bumbarrels (long-tailed tits) twenty in a drove' flitting down the local hedge rows. For

it is Clare's 'humanism ... that gives the natural world its very savour'.<sup>1</sup> What can be said in reply?

Is it Clare's (and others') humanism that gives the natural world its very savour? Since 'savour' is a metaphor for *felt* value, this is not an entirely neutral question. Perhaps the question should be re-expressed as 'What gives nature its importance or significance, or allows us to understand it not as indifferent but as wonderful?'

Well, poetry is written for humans, and Clare's poetry is partly written to represent animals like 'the jetty snail' as possessed of human feelings or characteristics such as 'earnest heed and tremulous intent', and thus as fellow creatures that we can understand and with which we can sympathise.

But much the same projection occurs when buildings or belongings are ascribed attitudes or feelings. Thus in Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, when Mole returns to his underground home, the glow of the firelight plays 'on familiar and friendly things [in this chapter, his furniture, his shelves and his larder] which had long been unconsciously a part of him, and now smilingly received him back, without rancour'; and 'it was good to think he had this to come back to, this place which was all his own, these things that were so glad to see him again and could always be counted upon for the same simple welcome'.<sup>2</sup>

Again, the annual Service of Nine Lessons and Carols at King's College Cambridge includes a liturgical bidding (addressed to the congregation but forming part of a prayer) to 'make glad this chapel' with God's praise.<sup>3</sup>

Such projection of feelings is an important use of language for making us, its human hearers, feel at home and not isolated as if in a coldly indifferent universe. Whether these passages express humanism (one conveying the feelings of an animal, the other an exhortation to people which is part of a conversation with God) is fortunately not the key point. The point is rather whether what makes the natural world important is human judgements and projections of this kind; and part of the answer is that such judgements and projections confer significance on much more than the natural world, helping as they do to make our lives livable, or at least tolerable.

Accordingly, I think another part of the answer is that while our eyes can be opened to the natural world by language of this kind, there must be some further basis to its importance, for otherwise its importance would be restricted to items that happen to be or become the objects of human projections, and would have a strength and basis no different from that of those artefacts (such as Mole's goods and chattels) and buildings (such as King's College Chapel) onto which similar feelings are (as we have been seen) sometimes projected. Yet nature poetry sometimes works through refusal to project (or detect) feelings, as when William Wordsworth, in his poem 'Resolution and Independence', compares his leech-gatherer to a huge stone 'not all alive nor dead', yet feels chastened by what he learns.<sup>4</sup>

## UNPROJECTED VALUE

Holland puts a string of questions to adherents of belief in value that is not a function of human valuation (call this ‘non-anthropogenic value’, since this phrase is widely found in the literature). What would such value be like, and what account are we to give of Clare’s animals and birds ‘if we are barred from referring to them as melancholy or coy’? While the second as well as the first challenge should be taken up, it should at once be remarked that the adherent of non-anthropogenic value has no need to debar either herself or others from referring to herons as melancholy or long-tailed tits as coy (although she may prefer to regard herons as invigorating and long-tailed tits as sociable). All she needs to claim is that there is value in their lives independent of human valuation (and independent of the projections of poets, story-tellers and the devisers of liturgies).

Thus she will want to say such things as that their flourishing is valuable whether or not a poet or anyone else has noticed it, just as was that of those Northamptonshire species *not* remarked by Clare; and that such flourishing supplies a reason for being protected and allowed to survive by any moral agent (human or otherwise), which is not at all the same as being actually valued by such an agent. As Thomas Gray points out in his *Elegy*,

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear;  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air

rather like the forgotten ‘village-Hampden’ or ‘mute inglorious Milton’ who may be buried around him.<sup>5</sup> Indeed the majority of Earth’s species are not so much forgotten as undiscovered, but no less valuable for that. Equally, the well-being of the heron and of the long-tailed tit could be held to matter, whether or not they share in or suffer from our feelings or passions. In a brief response, where sustained philosophical niceties would be out of place, this may serve as a response to Holland’s first challenge.

The second challenge can be tackled by considering how non-anthropogenic value might be expressed in poetry. (The poetry will of course be a human creation, and intended for human hearers or readers. But it could still convey something of the independent importance of wild creatures, an importance independent of human judgements.) We may (and probably will) disagree with the sentiments expressed by William Cowper in *The Task* (1784), but can still recognise that he was writing of the rights, claims and freedoms of humble creatures irrespective of human rights and claims:

The sum is this: if man’s convenience, health  
Or safety interfere, *his* rights and claims  
Are paramount, and must extinguish theirs.  
Else they are all – the meanest things that are –

As free to live and [to] enjoy that life  
As God was free to form them at the first.<sup>6</sup>

While this is an expression of what the late Richard Routley called a 'Greater Value' theory (and a version hard to defend at that), it is by the same token a recognition of there being value (albeit a lesser value than that of human interests, according to Cowper) in the lives of nonhuman living creatures. And if Cowper were asked whether this value was generated by human judgements, the world-view presented here makes it highly unlikely that he would have answered in the affirmative.

But a higher view of trees and their charms is found in Andrew Marvell's 'The Garden':

No white nor red was ever seen  
So am'rous as this lovely green.  
Fond lovers, cruel as their Flame,  
Cut in these trees their Mistress name.  
Little, alas, they know or heed,  
How far these beauties Hers exceed!  
Fair Trees! Where s'eer your barks I wound,  
No Name shall but your own be found.

Here, and in Marvell's penultimate stanza on the original garden, natural beauty objectively outstrips human beauty (or 'Virgineae ... Gratia formae', in Marvell's parallel poem 'Hortus').<sup>7</sup> And while beauty (like colours, but unlike intrinsic value, in my view) may depend for its value on the appreciation of a perceiver ('inherent value' in the literature), Marvell would deny that the capacity to be thus appreciated is in any way dependent on such perception.

To find recognition of nature's importance in the absence of 'a humanistic sensitivity', however, the adherent of non-anthropogenic value could turn again to expressions of nature's otherness, and to passages which, sooner than humanise nature, stress that we have a need for nature untamed. For awareness of nature's importance need not depend on feeling at home in a native habitat, even if John Clare's sensitivity was structured in this way.

Such an approach to understanding nature may be found in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, particularly when the stress is on nature's alienness. In the poem 'Inversnaid', which depicts the Scottish mountain stream of the poem's title as a wild horse surging down into a loch, the final stanza affirms the need of the world for untamed wilderness:

What would the world be, once bereft  
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,  
O let them be left, wildness and wet;  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.<sup>8</sup>

## UNPROJECTED VALUE

This is not the language of feeling at home, but of the world's need for places and things entirely beyond the control of humanity. The same language could, as it happens, be held to chime with belief in intrinsic value, if such value is present in rampant unplanted vegetation (weeds) and the lives of the creatures of the wilderness. More to the point, it can help explain one thing that Holland seeks to explain, namely 'what we have lost'; not in this case the loss of John Clare's sense of belonging, but the loss on the part of modern (or nowadays of post-modern) city-dwellers of the experience of wild places and elemental forces.

The issue of nature's significance may not in any case be the same as the issue of 'what we have lost', since this significance belongs as much to the future as to the past; but as the issue of loss has been raised, Hopkins' answer is as relevant as that of humanistic sensitivity. And there is more to his answer; see his poems 'Binsey Poplars', a nineteenth-century environmental proto-protest against 'the growing green' being hewn, where what 'after-comers cannot guess' is 'the beauty been';<sup>9</sup> and, there again, 'God's Grandeur', where 'nature is never spent' and 'There lives the deepest freshness deep down things, ... Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and ah! Bright wings.'<sup>10</sup>

Nor is awareness of nature's otherness confined to theists. Later in Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, in a pantheistic (or pagan) chapter entitled 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn', Rat and Mole are so caught up in the experience of a river and an island at a summer daybreak as to discern the presence of a numinous pipe-playing Helper:

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror – indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy – but it was an awe that smote him and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near.... Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.<sup>11</sup>

This passage is not concerned to convey a projection of the feelings of the writer nor of his characters, nor a humanistic judgement, but an evocation of encountering a force that is both fearful, attractive and enticing. The soft, hidden but imperious summons of nature cannot lightly be disobeyed, or so Grahame seems to convey.

Holland asks what gives the natural world its very savour. If an awareness of nature's significance can be conveyed through diverse passages like those of Marvell, Gray, Cowper, Wordsworth, Hopkins and Grahame, the answer may be that this savour can be evoked without dependence on the mediation of humanistic sensitivity, much as this can assist.

If, however, the question changes back to whether the value of living creatures (or of anything else, come to that, such as autonomy or meaningful work) is

dependent on the valuations of conscious valuers, and would be absent if those valuations were unanimously neutral or adverse or silent, I have argued for a negative answer in this journal already,<sup>12</sup> and would not wish to add to it here.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Alan Holland, Editorial, *Environmental Values*, **13.4** (2004), pp. 419–20, at p. 419.
- <sup>2</sup> Kenneth Grahame, *Wind in the Willows*, London: Methuen, (1908) 1950, p. 71.
- <sup>3</sup> Service of Nine Lessons and Carols, BBC Radio 4 broadcast, 24 December 2004.
- <sup>4</sup> William Wordsworth, *Poems*, Volume I (ed. John O. Hayden), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 553.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas Gray, *The Poems of Thomas Gray* (ed. H.W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966, p. 39.
- <sup>6</sup> William Cowper, *The Task* (1784), cited in Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1983, p.153
- <sup>7</sup> Andrew Marvell, *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (ed. Hugh MacDonald), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952, pp. 51–3 ('The Garden') and 54–5 ('Hortus').
- <sup>8</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (ed. W.H. Gardner), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953, 'Inversnaid', pp. 50–51.
- <sup>9</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *ibid.*, 'Binsey Poplars', pp. 39–40.
- <sup>10</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *ibid.*, 'God's Grandeur', p. 27.
- <sup>11</sup> Grahame, *Wind in the Willows*, pp. 92–3.
- <sup>12</sup> Robin Attfield, 'Postmodernism, Value and Objectivity', *Environmental Values*, **10.2**, 2001, pp. 145–62; see also Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics: An Overview for the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge: Polity Press and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003, chapters 1–3. I am grateful to Margaret Johnston and Christopher Norris for their helpful suggestions in the preparation of this paper, with which each will foreseeably (and substantially) disagree.