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# Do Meaningful Relationships with Nature Contribute to a Worthwhile Life?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that a worthwhile life is one in which the meaningful relationships existing in nature are recognised and respected. A meaningful relationship occurs when the interactions between two entities have significance in their past history and its anticipated continuation. The form in which the history of both the human and the non-human is related is narrative. A life is enriched or impoverished by the subject's relationships to other people and nature, and as such is more or less worthwhile. The argument presented here shows how Alan Holland's approach to conservation decision making can be extended to have relevance to individual lives, and that a strong ethical position can be developed from this insight.

## KEYWORDS

Narrative, relationships, worthwhile life, environmental ethics, conservation

## INTRODUCTION

I will argue that a worthwhile life is one in which the meaningful relationships existing in nature are recognised and respected. The historical narrative of a life reveals whether it can be considered to be worthwhile. A life is enriched or impoverished by the subject's relationships to other people and nature, and as such is more or less worthwhile. In arguing that to live a worthwhile life an agent must recognise and respect the meaningful relationships in nature that are present in the agent's life I want to be clear that I am not claiming that these are sufficient conditions for a life to be worthwhile. There are many things that may feature in the narrative of a worthwhile life besides nature, for example friendship and intellectual pursuits.

The approach of linking meaningful relationships, narrative, and worthwhile lives originates from the work of Alan Holland (2006: 139–142). Holland's main interest is in showing how the three can be linked to give a new philosophical approach to the problems of nature conservation.<sup>1</sup> My intent is to show that Holland's position can be seen to have direct relevance to each of our individual lives as well as for conservation decision making, and that a strong ethical position can be developed from his insight. Linking meaningful relations and the idea of a worthwhile life Holland claims:

... the living of worthwhile lives depends, among other things, on our ability to sustain meaningful relationships. It seems to me that the normal relation between the two terms is that of mutuality – worthwhile lives normally involve meaningful relationships, and meaningful relationships normally signify worthwhile lives. (Holland 2006: 139)

Holland is at pains to establish that meaningful relationships do not necessarily require that the relationships have meaning to the entities involved in the relationship. This is a key point that will be developed further below. For now it is important to understand that Holland's conception (on my interpretation<sup>2</sup>) of the kind of things that may have meaningful relationships extends beyond sentient beings to include non-sentient nature, for example individual trees are clearly included. Further, 'wholes' such as place, landscapes, herds and species are all capable of meaningful relationships on this account. Holland (2006: 140–141) states:

... (my understanding of) nature is a deeply historical concept and is on this account charged with meaning. Natural relationships are a paradigm of meaningful relationships both on account of the (past) history invested in them and on account of the (future) history that they portend. They encompass, for example, all those biotic relations that make evolution, speciation and biodiversity possible. Meaningful relationships therefore can be evolutionary and ecological as well as cultural. The chief difference between natural and cultural 'meanings'

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lies in the fact that cultural relationships will tend to be *meaningful* to the parties concerned, whereas natural relationships will tend not to be.

The articulation of Holland's approach to nature conservation given here is based on Holland and Rawles (1994), Holland and O'Neill (2003) and O'Neill, Holland and Light (2007). Holland argues that events in the history of a place are what give significance to it and that the key conservation question is how to continue the historical narrative of a place. In selecting between future possibilities for a place the challenge is how to maintain the coherence of the narrative, given the events within it. Holland states:

Conservation is ... about preserving the future *as a realisation of the potential of the past* ... (it) is about negotiating the transition from past to future in such a way as to secure the transfer of maximum significance. (Holland and Rawles 1994)

The narrative approach recognises that multiple, potentially conflicting, narratives of the events that have occurred in any place are probable and that unemotional, scientific, description does not automatically outweigh other narratives that articulate cultural beliefs and personal experience. Verbally Holland makes the claim that meaningful relationships are what give significance within a narrative.<sup>3</sup> By meaningful relationships Holland means those relationships that are of (key) importance in the history of the 'actors' (people, animals, trees etc) that inhabit the place under consideration. If this is the case then meaningful relationships play a key role in nature conservation. We must understand the relationships that exist and the impact of any proposed change on them if we are to determine the best continuation of a narrative.

A worthwhile life is one where the subject of the life may be thought of as living well or having a good life. What it is to live well or have a good life has historically been answered in many ways. There are two ways in which the argument I will put forward may be seen as a development of existing thinking. Firstly through the prominence it gives to meaningful relationships and secondly by identifying in what ways nature, and our response to it, may contribute to the living of a worthwhile life. In considering what constitutes a worthwhile life I have drawn heavily on MacIntyre (1985: 219) in two respects. Firstly his contention that the living of a worthwhile life is revealed by its narrative, and secondly his conception that a worthwhile life involves the quest for what the worthwhile life consists of. My development of MacIntyre's position is to show the importance of meaningful relationships to the quest for what the worthwhile life is. It is not only the relationships that a person has that count but also their attitude to other relationships. It is important to remember we are using Holland's history-based definition of what counts as a meaningful relationship at this point and that the relationship may be with 'wholes' and not just individuals. I will argue that the sorts of meaningful relationship that may feature in a worthwhile life include relations between humans such as friendship, relationships between humans and nature such as exist between a farmer and his herd

and respecting meaningful relationships within nature such as those between different members of a pack.

#### OUTLINE ARGUMENT

Holland's accounts are insightful and persuasive, but none the less he does not provide us with a detailed argument linking the major ideas that he uses. What I have attempted to do is to establish one possible way in which this argument can be developed. Steps W1–W7 are (I suggest) details that are required to link the different aspects of Holland's position. Some of these are explicitly stated by Holland (e.g. W6) while others (e.g. W3) are the result of consideration of what is implicit in, or required by, Holland's position. In developing these last I have attempted to stay true to the spirit of Holland's intent while providing a further level of detail. I have ordered these statements in a sequence that allows the underlying thinking to be introduced in a coherent way.

- W1. I want to live a worthwhile life.
- W2. The living of a worthwhile life is revealed by its narrative.
- W3. A worthwhile life is one that recognises, respects and develops [the right sort of] meaningful relationships.
- W4. To recognise a meaningful relationship I must understand its historical narrative.
- W5. To respect a meaningful relationship I must understand the narrative of its likely future trajectory and the impact of my intended actions on this trajectory.
- W6. Nature contains many meaningful relationships.
- W7. To live a worthwhile life I must recognise and respect the [positive] meaningful relationships in nature.

#### DETAILED ARGUMENT

*W1. I want to live a worthwhile life*

This is an assumption, however it seems a plausible one, as few people, if any, deliberately set out to lead a life that is not worthwhile. The challenge is in the range of what is considered to make a life more or less worthwhile.<sup>4</sup> The following hints are provided by Holland (2006) as to what he considers a worthwhile life and my intent here is to keep faith with this outline:

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- That the answer to the question ‘How should we live our lives’ should not be construed in a narrow individualistic sense; lives are not lived in isolation, and for Holland this implies concern for others and the others we should be concerned about includes the natural world.
- In describing the good life we should move away from preference satisfaction and focus on the aspirational rather than the consumational aspects of desire i.e. the standard economic model of the good life is unsatisfactory.
- ‘Worthwhile lives normally involve meaningful relationships, and meaningful relationships normally signify worthwhile lives.’ (Remember Holland’s history-based definition of what is meant by a meaningful relationship.)
- A worthwhile life includes a quest for meaning, both in our own lives and in the existence of those living and non-living entities that our lives intertwine with. Destruction of the natural world not only destroys our means of subsistence, but also destroys that of which we have understanding and sensibility and hence has meaning for us. And the way in which we make sense of and give meaning to the world is through narrative.
- Meaningful lives that have no connection with the natural world are very hard to imagine

The question of what constitutes a worthwhile life is a very long-standing one. Where does Holland’s approach sit on the spectrum of existing answers to this question? Parfit (1994: 235) distinguishes three types of theories about what makes someone’s life go best. First are hedonistic theories, according to which ‘what would be best for someone is what would make their lives happiest’ (a happy life). Second are desire-fulfilment theories, according to which a person’s good ‘is what, throughout his life, would best fulfil his desires’ (a satisfied life). Third are objective-list theories, according to which ‘certain things are good or bad for us, whether or not we want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things’ (a worthwhile life).

Holland’s approach falls into the last of these categories. There are two problems that arise from this: a general question of justifying why the objective-list approach is better than the first two, and a question of justifying the particular objective good (meaningful relationships) that Holland identifies. As the focus here is on developing Holland’s approach I do not intend to do more than recognise the first of these questions. Regarding the second Holland asserts that worthwhile lives (usually) entail meaningful relationships and vice versa, but does not produce a detailed argument in support of this. Further, as Holland does not intend us to take meaningful relationships as exhausting the list of goods, we are left with the question of what other goods should be on the list and how meaningful relationships rank against these.

I take Holland’s conception of a worthwhile life to have a strong moral element, and I will use the term worthwhile life in a way that distinguishes it from

a flourishing life to emphasise this. In the sense that I use it a worthwhile life is one spent (amongst other things) in attempting to achieve 'the good' or to act rightly. I want to emphasise that on this account 'the good' can include such things as friendship or intellectual pursuits and that a worthwhile life is not simply concerned with duty. On the other hand to flourish is to have the goods that a being of our kind requires such as food and health. During his spell in prison Nelson Mandela did not flourish, but his actions that lead to his imprisonment have undoubtedly made his life more worthwhile. Someone who is healthy and lives the life of the 'idle rich' flourishes but does not live a worthwhile life.

Some further thoughts on what it is to live a worthwhile life follow. Firstly happiness does not automatically depend on either living a worthwhile life (what the worthwhile life requires may make us miserable) or on flourishing (many peoples' happiest times have been when they are in some sense deprived). Secondly worthwhile lives do not necessarily look the same. There are many conceptions of what 'the good' consists in. What gives a life the possibility of being worthwhile is that the agent attempts to understand what 'the good' is and to live accordingly. Lastly, worthwhile lives are not lived in isolation. The individual belongs to one or more communities and the individual's conception of 'the good' is related (or in opposition) to 'the good' of the community.

W2. *The living of a worthwhile life is revealed by its narrative*

What is narrative? A narrative is a 'story' that links together a sequence of events in a meaningful way. It establishes, or attempts to establish, that the events form a structure or coherent stream. It connects (significant) events in a way that has explanatory power; we can understand why the subject of the narrative is as it is, and what this means. Narrative is a fundamental way in which people shape and make sense of their experience, the events in their lives, and the events that take place around them.

A narrative may be simply a spoken sentence, such as 'I walked across the moor', or it may be as extensive and complex as the notion of progress captured in a book. It may relate key events, or everyday activity. In creating the narrative the narrator adds their understanding of the events and how they relate to each other. A narrative is thus more than a list of the events it relates. Not only events are linked by the narrative, but also the agents and relationships that feature in it. The narrative is not fiction. It is based on 'facts', events that have occurred. However, for a given set of events multiple narratives are possible. There may well be different understandings of the events and how they relate to each other, each with its own narrative. A narrative may be challenged on the events that are selected or omitted, on the interpretation of these events and how they relate. So far I have described the narratives we are conscious of and choose to articulate; however, a narrative may be beyond our conscious awareness, though inherent in our actions.

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Anne Richter holds that Shakespeare portrayed human life in dramatic narratives because he took it that human life already had the form of dramatic narrative (MacIntyre 1985: 143). On this account the form of the narrative that human life takes is that the subject is set a task whose completion will contribute to the human good. Completion of the task is obstructed by both inward and outward evils. The subject's narrative reveals the virtues they possess that help overcome the evils, and the vices they display in giving in to evils. The narrative of an individual does not just tell their story. It tells their story as part of a history that precedes them and a society that surrounds them. At best the individual is the co-author of his or her own narrative. There are other 'players' in the narrative, whose actions and stories will impact on the individual's narrative that is being told. It is clear from Holland's account that the other 'players' include nature and place in their many guises. Leopold (1968: 205) highlights the role that 'the land' played in the very different histories of the settlement of Kentucky and the American South West, and comments that the role of the land is seldom recognised in describing the differing successes of these enterprises and the lives of the individuals involved in them.

MacIntyre establishes a strong link between the virtues, which he sees as differing between societies, and the narrative of an individual's life within a society:

If a human life is understood as a progress through harms and dangers, moral and physical, which someone may encounter and overcome in better and worse ways and with a greater or lesser measure of success, the virtues will find their place as those qualities the possession and exercise of which generally tend to success in this enterprise and the vices likewise as qualities which likewise tend to failure. Each human life will then embody a story whose shape and form will depend upon what is counted a harm and danger and upon how success and failure, progress and its opposite are understood and evaluated. (MacIntyre 1985: 143)

To ask 'how may I live a worthwhile life' is to ask to what extent does the narrative of my life reveal a quest for what the worthwhile life is, in both thought and deed. The challenges each of us face in the quest may be very different in both nature and magnitude; our responses to them may be very different, and we may succeed or fail in many different ways. Success or failure in meeting the challenges does not automatically imply a worthwhile life, or otherwise. Some challenges may leave no chance of success, yet the individual can strongly display the virtues in trying to meet them. I am creating a story that runs from my birth to my death, I am the subject of a unique history with its own particular meaning. The meaning is revealed by the challenges I face and my demonstration of the virtues in response to them.

The focus in articulating the position described above has been on the individual, however it should not in any sense be taken as portraying the individual as isolated. While my narrative is unique, it is not independent. Other unique



narratives are unfolding around me, and my narrative is intertwined and interacts with them. These are the narratives of the individuals I meet, the communities of which I am part and, in turn, the society of which these communities are part. My own narrative is only intelligible as part of this greater set of narratives; I am part of their unfolding histories and their history is my history. For example, all of our lives are intertwined with the unfolding narrative of global warming and while none of us can individually stop it, the narrative of our life shows whether we have made any effort to reduce our contribution.

*W3. A worthwhile life is one that recognises, respects and develops [the right sort of] meaningful relationships*

What do we mean by a meaningful relationship? An obvious example would be the relationship between parent and child. For a long period the child is physically dependent on its parents and its emotional and intellectual development are also heavily dependent on its parents. For the parents there is a long period when their actions are significantly altered by the need to care for the child; the child gives a different purpose and focus to their lives.

The definition of meaningful relationship that I intend to use is:

*A meaningful relationship occurs when the interactions between two entities have significance in their past history and its anticipated continuation.*

I have used the general term entities, rather than people, as I will look to extend the idea of meaningful relationships to nature in a further step of the argument. I will start my exploration of meaningful relationships by considering what might, or might not, count as a meaningful relationships for humans. In doing this it is important to remember that it is the history of the interactions between the people involved that reveals whether the interactions are significant and the relationship meaningful. For humans the meaning that the interactions have to the individuals involved constitutes part of the history. For most of nature there is no awareness of meaning and it is important to understand that this does not debar entities within nature from having interactions that are historically significant.<sup>5</sup> Returning to the parent-child example, we can see that for parent and child the interactions between them have great significance in their past history and its anticipated continuation. We can highlight the value of the relationship by considering its absence. Where a parent is missing we feel the child suffers a great loss in not having this relationship; where the relationship between parent and child is poor we feel both are missing something important.

We are now in a position to examine more generally what gives rise to meaningful relationships. Physically blood ties, sexual attraction and extended proximity are often a basis on which meaningful relationships develop. We have terms that reflect these relationships: kin, partners, friends and colleagues. Families, communities and work all give situations where meaningful relationships

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can develop; as we have seen above, there are many situations where we expect meaningful relationships to exist and are surprised or shocked when they do not. I note here a possible tie to virtue; that the different virtues we expect an agent to demonstrate depend on how meaningful the relationship between them and the other agent is. It is callous to ignore the disappointment our partner feels at failing in a job interview; but we are not expected to seek out the other people who have failed to get the job and console them. The difference is precisely in the existence, or otherwise, of a meaningful relationship between the agents.

There are a number of further aspects of meaningful relationships to bring out. Firstly meaningful relationships are not necessarily good. The relationship in a violent marriage has significance in the past history of both partners and its anticipated continuation, but is harmful to one or both partners. I will use the term positive of a relationship that is beneficial or enhancing to the partners and negative for one that is harmful or diminishing. Secondly I want to differentiate meaningful relationships from significant events. Meaningful relationships contain significant events; for example getting married is a significant event in a relationship. However significant events can take place outside a meaningful relationship; for example a chance conversation with a stranger leads us to see difficulties in our life from a different perspective. Thirdly meaningful relationships may be symmetric or asymmetric. In a loving relationship each partner feels love for the other; there is symmetry. However there is an asymmetric relationship between a rock star and his/her fans. The relationship is one-to-many, and while the fans may feel adulation for the star, each of them is unknown to the star. Yet without the fans the narrative of the rock star's life would be very different, so the relationship clearly has significance in the past and future history of both the star and the fans.

Meaningful relationships can be contrasted with both the absence of any relationship, and with the existence of a relationship that is not very meaningful. What I am taking to be a meaningful relationship makes a major contribution to the history of the people involved, for example the relationships we have with members of our family.<sup>6</sup> This can be contrasted with relationships that only contribute in a small way to our lives, for example the people we recognise and say hello to on the way to work.

What is the link between meaningful relationships and living a worthwhile life? Returning to MacIntyre's conception of the worthwhile life: 'the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is' (MacIntyre 1985: 219). For MacIntyre a worthwhile life is linked to the goals of the community and it is important to note that on this basis MacIntyre's conception is not a statement of individualism. Our search may reveal an understanding that helps others, as well as ourselves, lead a worthwhile life and this accords with Holland's view that we should not answer the question 'how should we live our lives' in a narrow individualistic

sense. We have also seen that MacIntyre understands life to be a progress through moral and physical harms and dangers. Meaningful relationships figure in this in two ways. Firstly, some of the harms and dangers threaten (positive) meaningful relationships; they are harms and dangers because they damage, or threaten to damage, relationships that have significance in our being, or the being of others. Secondly, a worthwhile life is one that seeks positive meaningful relationships; meaningful relationships have significance in our being, positive meaningful relationships enhance the lives of those who engage in them. Part of the quest for what the worthwhile life is can thus be seen to consist in developing our capability to initiate and develop meaningful relationships through recognising their significance in our lives and the lives of others, and understanding the actions that enhance or detract from these relationships.

My claim is not that there is a formulaic answer as to which relationships each individual *must* develop, or that meaningful relationships are *all* that constitute a worthwhile life. However a life that did not contain *any* meaningful relationships would be seriously lacking; we would feel it was empty and have sympathy for its subject. Further, we would not feel a life that was indifferent to threats to its own meaningful relationships, or those of others, was worthwhile; it would be missing a key aspect of the good life.

From this discussion it can be seen that a worthwhile life is one that recognises, respects and develops meaningful relationships:

- Recognises: without recognition that a relationship is meaningful to us, or others, then we cannot treat it with respect.
- Respects: without respect we will, knowingly or otherwise, put positive meaningful relationships that have significance in our history, and the history of others, at risk of harm. And harm to these relationships will make our life, or the life of others, less worthwhile.
- Develops: meaningful relationships have beginnings and ends; they require care to develop and nurture. In seeking the good life the ability to develop meaningful relationships that have significance to us and others is an invaluable asset.

How do recognition, respect and development of meaningful relationships feature in the virtues? One argument is that they are in themselves virtues; however the line I will take is that they are an element of many virtues, particularly if the virtues are viewed in the light of a particular role. I will suggest that recognition, respect and development of meaningful relationships underpin the virtues required to be a good parent, good partner, good friend, good manager and indeed all roles that require a significant interaction with other people. I will further suggest that they are key to the environmentally responsive aspect of the environmental virtues identified by Sandler (2006: 263).

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*W4. To recognise a meaningful relationship I must understand its historical narrative*

Two people have a meaningful relationship when the interactions between them have significance in their past history and its anticipated continuation; my claim is that it is narrative that allows us to recognise when the interactions are such as to have significance in a relationship, and when they are simply events. To successfully identify and understand the interactions between people we place an event in the context of their narrative histories and of the settings in which they act and suffer. For example, it is narrative that lets us see whether a significant event, such as a chance meeting with a stranger that alters our lives, is simply an event (we never see the stranger again), or part of a meaningful relationship (we develop a friendship with the stranger). MacIntyre states:

... we render the actions of others intelligible in this way because action itself has a basically historical character. It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. (MacIntyre 1985: 211)

The narratives reveal the presence or absence of those aspects of the relationship that mean it has significance (or otherwise) in the history of the agents: duration, intensity, dependence etc. Our understanding of the meaningful relationships that others have contributes to our understanding of their actions.

When I see two people meeting, how will I know whether the event is significant, or the relationship meaningful? A man speaks to a woman in the street. I imagine the possibilities. Are they married? I see no ring. Are they lovers? There is no sign of intimacy. Are they friends? Further observation may answer some of these questions, but without knowledge of their history it is unlikely that I can do more than guess at the significance, or otherwise, of the relationship between them. To generalise, when we meet a new situation we seek to create a narrative that will give meaning to what we see.<sup>7</sup> We look for the historical clues that show whether the event we see is part of a sequence that has meaning. Have the two people described above ever met, what has passed between them. We need knowledge to understand not just what has passed physically, but also the emotions that have accompanied the events.

I want to make clear that when I talk about the narrative of a life being enriched I mean enriched for the subject of the narrative, not in the sense of the narrative being a 'better story' even if the subject of the story suffers as a result of the events that make it a 'better story'. The narrative of a tragic life may hold our interest in the way that the narrative of an 'average' life does not, however the life that is the subject of the narrative is not enriched by the events in the narrative. What makes the narrative hold our interest as a story may ruin the life that is the subject of the narrative, say a doomed love affair, or protracted struggle with an implacable enemy. I say 'may ruin' to recognise that, for example, a

doomed love affair might be the source of the rejected lover's artistic creativity. We cannot be clear what does, or does not, enrich a life without understanding the narrative of that life; what should concern us is whether the life that is revealed by the narrative fairs better or worse.<sup>8</sup>

*W5. To respect a meaningful relationship I must understand the narrative of its likely future trajectory and the impact of my intended actions on this trajectory*

I stated above that without recognition we will, knowingly or otherwise, put meaningful relationships in danger of harm, and that harm to these relationships will make our life, or the life of others, less worthwhile. If we are to respect a relationship then we must, as a general rule, prevent it from coming to harm. To avoid a potential harm becoming a reality then we must not only recognise the existence of the relationship through understanding of its historical narrative, we must understand how the narrative is likely to continue and how our actions will increase or decrease the significance that the relationship has in the lives of the people and/or entities in it.

Perhaps the woman above who meets a man in the street is my sister, and the man is a lover who I feel treated her badly. She is still friendly with him. When we meet shall I be civil to him, tell him what I think, or perhaps drive him away? What is the likely future of their relationship? Will they get back together or will she keep him at a safe distance? Will showing my sister what I think make her draw closer to the man or withdraw from him? Will the man be more likely to respect her having reflected on my outburst? Leaving aside the question of which of my possible actions is right, there are two questions. Is this a relationship I should respect and if it is how will my actions affect it? And I cannot do this without understanding its likely future trajectory, and the impact of my intended actions on this trajectory.

So far I have argued that we should respect *positive* meaningful relationships, those that enhance the being of all parties in the relationship. What does it mean to respect these relationships? As a minimum this requires us not to act in a way that may harm the relationship. However there will be many occasions when respect requires us to do more than not cause harm to the relationship, we are required to act to prevent harm coming to a meaningful relationship, or to act so as to help the relationship develop. For example a parent sees his or her children squabbling and intervenes to try and bring about an amicable resolution. Similarly a parent may try and find playmates for a young child so that they can start to develop meaningful relationships.

Holland's position is that worthwhile lives normally involve meaningful relationships, and that meaningful relationships normally signify worthwhile lives (Holland 2006: 139). In exploring the implications of Holland's position in more detail it is clear that this is a plausible claim for positive meaningful

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relationships, however it does not seem plausible for negative meaningful relationships. Negative meaningful relationships make lives go less well, and it is on this basis I suggest that we are not always required to respect negative meaningful relationships. A more common problem arises because many relationships have both good and bad aspects. In these instances respect requires us not to harm the good aspects of the relationship and, on occasion, to act to reduce the bad aspects of the relationship. The question of when it is, or is not, all right to interfere with a positive or negative meaningful relationship is clearly a complex one. To what extent should we respect the autonomy of people, or more broadly entities within nature and to what extent should we interfere to prevent harm?<sup>9</sup> I will return to this question below.

W6. *Nature contains many meaningful relationships*

When I introduced my definition, ‘A meaningful relationship occurs when the interactions between two entities have significance in their past history and its anticipated continuation’, I indicated that I had used the general term entities as I intended extending the idea of meaningful relationships to nature. Introducing the use of meaningful relationships in human lives I took the parent-child relationship as a paradigm example. My introduction to meaningful relationships in nature is to claim that there are many examples of the parent-offspring relationship in nature, and that these relationships have significance in the past and future history of the creatures involved. Similarly many parent-parent and sibling-sibling relationships in nature have significance in the history of both parties and can be considered meaningful relationships. This is not to say all meaningful relationships are in some sense equal and I will return to this below (W7). What follows is an exploration of what makes the factors that contribute to the history between two beings have more or less significance.

What makes a relationship meaningful? This depends on the nature of the entities in the relationship. Humans have the capability to reflect on their actions and their potential outcomes, and these actions take place in a cultural setting. Both these factors contribute to what it means for the interactions between two people to have significance in their past history and its anticipated continuation, but they are not present in the interactions in nature. The range and depth of emotions felt by humans are greater than those of even our closest relatives, however these capabilities are present in other creatures. For example where two dogs are kept in the same house and one dies, the other often behaves in a way that indicates a loss. Similarly, birds such as swans and geese are reputed to ‘mourn’ if their partner is killed. I take these reactions as indicating that the creatures have significance in each other’s history, and that under my definition a meaningful relationship exists. I want to be clear at this point that while the emotive aspect of what it is to be human or one of our close relatives features strongly in our narratives it is the history of the relationship that makes it mean-

ingful or otherwise. The relationships may have meaning to the actors involved but this is only part of what counts in the history, though it is clearly an important aspect. Even in human relationships the people involved are unlikely to be aware of the full history and meaning that their relationship entails.

Moving away from the capabilities that humans share with some creatures, the relationships between non-related members of the same species, and between members of different species, have significance. For example, within a pack the members have dominant-submissive relationships that affect an animal in both its feeding and breeding opportunities. Between species the roles of hunter and prey have significance in the past and future history of both parties. Consider the hunter-prey relationships of sentient animals typified by the relationship between wolf and deer. This has significance at many levels. In 'Thinking Like a Mountain' Leopold describes how exterminating the wolves from a mountain causes deer numbers to swell uncontrollably and so devastates the vegetation which means the deer die of starvation. Describing the wolf's howl he says:

Every living thing ... pays heed to that call. To the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast of blood on the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet. Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself. (Leopold 1968: 129)<sup>10</sup>

In Leopold's example we can ask whether the meaningful relationship is between a particular wolf and a particular deer, between a particular wolf pack and a particular deer herd, or between wolves as a species with deer as a species. As Leopold's example brings out, we can also ask what it is that makes the interactions between the wolves and the deer have significance. Is it the 'reminder of the way of all flesh', the need for the deer to be ever alert, fear in every shadow, or is it the deeper meaning, 'known only to the mountain', of what will happen to the vegetation and deer without the wolves. Clearly the wolves do have significance in the past and future history of the deer and vice versa. Leopold's description of the wolf's howl helps us realise that the deer's memory of wolves, and the chase, causes them fear. And this leads them to an alertness and awareness they might not otherwise experience. For both the wolves and the deer the ongoing relationship is literally a matter of life and death. The stalk, the chase and the kill have significance in the past history of both and its anticipated continuation.

We have seen above (W3) that meaningful relation may be positive or negative, a good thing or a bad thing for the people involved. From consideration of the relationship of the wolf and the deer described above it is clear that this is a complex question for relationships in nature. For the particular deer killed by a particular wolf its suffering and death are a terrible thing, yet for the wolf they are essential to life. Closer examination of this example reveals that the

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meaningful relationship is not the one between the particular deer and particular wolf, but the one between the herd and the pack in a particular location. It is obvious that the deer are good for the wolf, what Leopold makes clear is that the wolves are good for the deer; without the wolves the deer will multiply and destroy the habitat, and ultimately harm themselves. So despite the suffering of individual deer the relationship between the wolves and the deer as pack and herd is a positive one.

Some predator-prey relationships do not achieve this balance and the relationship may be regarded as negative. For example, a species that develops without predators has no awareness of danger and the appropriate response to it. If a predator is introduced the species may be exterminated. This is exactly what has happened to a number of flightless birds (and other animals) on isolated Pacific islands, either directly through human activities, or through the introduction of species such as rats and dogs (Leakey and Lewin 1996: 171–194). This highlights a potential issue for Holland. Why should we value balance, and does his account require the introduction of this as some sort of overarching value? My suggestion is that at least in the examples given here he does not require this. If what is valued is the past history of a relationship and its future trajectory we can see that the deer herd and wolf pack have an extensive history and a long-term future. The relationship between the Pacific island species and the introduced predator that exterminates it does not have a history or long-term future.

So far I have discussed the meaningful relationships of living entities and collections of these entities. Holland's conception of the sorts of thing that can have meaningful relationship includes what he terms 'the ecological'. As a minimum this must incorporate the possibility of meaningful relationships between living things and the physical environment they live in. I suggest that we should also interpret Holland as including the possibility of meaningful relationships between non-living things. For humans the relationship with place is clearly a meaningful one with humans having significance in place history and place having significance in the history of both individual humans and human groups. If we broaden our consideration from humans then it is clear that animals and plants can have significance in place history and, just as for humans, place can have significance in the history of animals and plants. In particular flora and fauna make a contribution to place character. Consideration of place character is one way we can start to understand how non-living things can have meaningful relationships with each other. For example place character is dependent on the historical interaction of rain, wind, rivers and lake, rocks and soil.

The next steps of my argument aim to establish how meaningful relationships in and with nature make a significant contribution to the good life for humans.



*W7. To live a worthwhile life I must recognise and respect the [positive] meaningful relationships in nature*

I have argued above (W3) that failure to respect meaningful human relationships potentially leads to danger and harm to something of significance, and that actual harm leads to people leading lives that are less worthwhile. I have further argued (W6) that meaningful relationships exist in nature. Harm to these relationships results in a reduction of significance in the anticipated continuation of the history of the affected creatures and communities. Holland (2006: 141) says:

In general, the honouring of a historical legacy – cultural, ecological or evolutionary which we find to be a central element in people’s concerns about ‘nature’, ‘biodiversity’ and lots else besides, is to be seen not as the securing of one more ‘asset’ among others, but as the lens through which other ‘assets’ gain their very significance.

We have seen that what gives significance for Holland is the presence of meaningful relationships and that the key conservation question is about continuation of historical narrative. On this basis there is no line that can be drawn between human meaningful relationships and non-human ones without being anthropocentric. Note that what I am saying here is that the meaningful relationships are due equal consideration, not necessarily equal treatment.<sup>11</sup> To live a worthwhile life I must respect nature’s meaningful relationships and prevent them from coming to harm. And to respect nature’s meaningful relationships I must first recognise them. The relationships I must recognise and respect are both those that exist in nature independently of me, and those that exist between nature and me.

Recognition of both positive and negative relationships is required. For humans we have seen that respect for positive meaningful relationships is required, but that when it comes to negative meaningful relationships the question is more complex. Similar considerations apply when considering meaningful relationships in nature. For example a parasite will not exist without the relationship it has with its host, yet the host is harmed; in this instance I would suggest that the relationship is one that should be respected owing to the historical significance of the relationship and the fact that the parasite cannot survive without the host. If we consider the human introduction of rats or dogs into a remote pacific island, then the new predator develops a negative meaningful relationship with the existing biota; we are not required to respect the relationships that the new prey develops, and this is because of the harm to existing meaningful relationships and its being less significant as it has less history. If we contrast this human introduction of new species with the moving of species that occurs as a matter of course within nature then we can see a potential problem – are we required to respect the new relationships even if they harm existing meaningful relationships, or are we required to prevent this? The fundamental question here is to what extent we should respect nature’s autonomy and what this looks like in

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practice<sup>12</sup>. Does respecting meaningful relationships simply mean that we leave them alone, or does it require us to intervene to protect or even enhance them? I suggest that Holland's reply would be that there is no formulaic reply to this, and that each situation would need to be judged on its merits. What Holland's approach does show is how we should go about deciding when intervention is justified and when it isn't. Exploration of the historical significance of meaningful relationships is what gives us the factors to consider in making our decision, and the attitude we should adopt in our decision making is one of respect.

What does this mean in practice? Our individual history and circumstances will lead us to very different opportunities for contact with nature. We both experience nature directly and have knowledge of nature that we do not experience. In addition to our own direct impact on nature, we cannot escape some responsibility for the impact of the society we live in on nature. There are many different ways in which recognition and respect may figure in a worthwhile life. It is perhaps more easily understood in its negative statement: a life that fails to show recognition and respect for nature in the appropriate way is in some sense a flawed one i.e. it is less worthwhile. However if nature is only a small part of an individual life then the flaw may be a minor one. If we consider humanity as a whole then we have a huge negative impact on nature; for at least some of us part of the quest for a worthwhile life must therefore be to understand what difference we can make as individuals to the impact our society has on nature. Most of us are not fully aware of how the food and goods we consume reach us yet through our act of consumption the narrative of how the food and goods are produced is linked to the narrative of our lives. And the narratives of both humans and nature involved in the production may well show that through our act of consumption we fail to recognise and respect meaningful relationships and that our life is correspondingly less worthwhile.

I want to make clear that I am not claiming all meaningful relationships are equal. There is a difference between the relationship I have with my children and the one I have with a friend. In nature the relationship between the wolf and the deer is very different from the relationship between (say) symbiotic partners. Recognising a meaningful relationship requires us to be aware of the different factors described above that give it its nature. When we respect a meaningful relationship we must bear these factors in mind; the actions that appropriately show respect may be very different between relationships. Additionally, there are instances when respecting one meaningful relationship may be at the expense of another and we may be called on to make a difficult choice.

## CONCLUSIONS

I set off by claiming that a strong ethical position could be established from Holland's approach. The argument developed here supports the claim that the

recognition, respect and development of meaningful relationships is action guiding; that we can see when our intended actions do, or do not, show the attitude of respect through their anticipated impact on the future trajectory of the meaningful relationship we are considering. We act wrongly when our actions do not demonstrate the required respect. This is not to claim that we can in some sense 'read off' what we should do in a particular situation. Recognition of meaningful relationships draws attention to the features of a situation that we are to consider, and respect guides us in how we should respond to these features. However in any given situation the agent may have to choose between different ways in which respect could be shown. Further, there will undoubtedly be difficult situations in which conflicts arise and respecting one relationship damages, or allows harm to come to, another. For example respecting the hunter-prey relationship between a peregrine and a pigeon allows the parent-offspring relationship between the pigeon and its chicks to end. A strong, other-regarding, ethical position can be established which is action guiding, but not prescriptive. The approach developed here is also action guiding in encouraging the quest for positive meaningful relationships with nature. There are many ways in that these can be developed depending on both our role and the opportunities available to us; taking these opportunities makes our life more worthwhile.

I have drawn heavily on MacIntyre's conception that the worthwhile life is one that involves the quest for what a worthwhile life is, and his contention that the living of a worthwhile life is revealed by its narrative. The argument I have put forward shows how Holland's position can be developed as a response to what the quest may look like for some of us. It shows the importance of meaningful relationships to the quest for what the worthwhile life consists of, firstly between humans, and secondly in and with nature. A strong link can be developed between Holland's use of narrative in nature conservation and MacIntyre's use of narrative in revealing the living of a worthwhile life.

I have argued that recognizing and respecting the meaningful relations in nature that are present in a person's life is necessary to a worthwhile life. A strong, other-regarding, ethical position can be established from this which will be action guiding, but not prescriptive. My conclusion is that the argument I have presented supports the position outlined by Holland in his approach to nature conservation and shows one way in which it can successfully be developed in more depth.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In outline Holland's argument is:

- H1. Every place has one or more narratives that tell the history of the events that have occurred there.
- H2. Future trajectories of the events contained in historical place narrative can be imagined.
- H3. Ethical environmental decision making is about choosing the most appropriate continuation of existing place narrative.
- H4. The most appropriate continuation of a place narrative is the one that retains the most significance.
- H5. Significance in place narrative is dependent on the meaningful relationships described in the narrative.
- H6. Selection of the most appropriate trajectory is not formulaic; a judgement of practical wisdom is called for.
- H7. Meaningful relationships contribute to the worthwhile existence of an entity; a worthwhile existence is one that has meaningful relationships.

<sup>2</sup> My reading is that it is important to distinguish meaning (in the sense of what something signifies to us) from meaningful relationship (which on the definition I give is dependent on there being a history of significant interaction between the beings involved). O'Neill (2008) gives an alternative interpretation. On my reading meaningful relationships can exist in nature without a human interpretive activity while for O'Neill 'a relationship can be meaningful only for a subject able to interpret it as such. In that sense there can be no meaningful relationships in nature that are independent of the human interpretive activity'. I agree with O'Neill in his assertion that meaning requires an interpretive activity, but disagree in what I take to be a meaningful relationship (in the sense used by Holland).

<sup>3</sup> I have based this on personal discussions with Alan.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Herman (1990).

<sup>5</sup> Some definitions of history limit its scope to humans and exclude nature: it is clear that Holland's intended use does not.

<sup>6</sup> Although am I talking about meaningful relationships and people in this paragraph it should be clear there are meaningful relationships in nature.

<sup>7</sup> In saying 'create a narrative' I am referring to what we do everyday when we interpret what we see and make guesses about what else is going on, and in doing so create a kind of story or account, not something new, special and dramatic.

<sup>8</sup> As Aristotle points out, it is not until a life is over that we know whether it is fortunate or unfortunate, worthwhile or wasted. As the narrative of the life unfolds, so earlier events in it are cast in a new light.

<sup>9</sup> See Hettinger (2005) for a full attempt to answer the question of when to respect nature's autonomy.

<sup>10</sup> Leopold's text is a good example of how narrative 'brings to life' place description and how the aesthetic features in the narrative – the sound of the wolf, the image of trees, snow and blood.

<sup>11</sup>This distinction of the difference between equal treatment and equal consideration of interests is attributable to Peter Singer. See for example Chapter 2 in *Animal Liberation*.

<sup>12</sup>Hettinger (2005) gives a full and thorough exploration of this, concluding ‘With respect for the autonomy of nature as a central moral norm for the human relationship with nature, human involvement with nature need not be harmful or degrading to nature in this important respect. This opens the door to the respectful human use of nature and to human flourishing in nature as real possibilities.’

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