Refusing Help and Inflicting Harm
A Critique of the Environmentalist View

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ABSTRACT

Due to a variety of natural causes, suffering predominates over well-being in the lives of wild animals. From an antispeciesist standpoint that considers the interests of all sentient individuals, we should intervene in nature to benefit these animals, provided that the expectable result is net positive. However, according to the environmentalist view the aim of benefiting wild animals cannot justify intervening in nature. In addition, harmful human interventions can sometimes be justified. This view assumes that (i) certain entities such as ecosystems or species have intrinsic value, and that (ii) at least sometimes these values are more important than nonhuman well-being. In this article I review the arguments in support of this view advanced by three prominent environmentalists (Albert Schweitzer, Paul W. Taylor and J. Baird Callicott) and show how none of them succeed at grounding these assumptions.

Keywords: animal ethics, antispeciesism, environmentalism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, nonhuman animals, intrinsic value, intervention in nature, wild animals, natural harms.

Human beings have the capacity to intervene in nature. That is, they can interfere with natural processes or change ecosystems, thereby altering the course of events that would otherwise develop if human action would not have taken place. Given this capacity to intervene, the question arises of whether this interference is morally justified and, if so, under which circumstances it should occur or which goals it must pursue.

Regarding this problem, there is a fundamental discrepancy between different views. In this article, I will assess two wide sets of these. On the one hand, those who claim that it is justified to intervene in nature to help animals that live in the wild (section 1). On the other hand, those who, assuming environmentalist perspectives, deny that such justification obtains. In addition, they claim that in certain occasions it is justified to

intervene in nature when doing so would cause harm to the animals that live there (section 2).

Environmentalist views asume two different theses: an axiological thesis and a thesis about our balance of reasons. I will show that none of the arguments used by three prominent environmentalists – Albert Schweitzer, Paul W. Taylor and J. Baird Callicott – succeed in justifying the axiological thesis (section 3). Next, I will argue that given its implications for human beings, the thesis about the balance of reasons is also unacceptable (section 4). I will conclude that the environmentalist view should be abandoned and that the antispeciesist view is right in claiming that we should intervene in nature to help the animals that inhabit it.

1. The antispeciesist view: interventions that benefit animals in the wild

According to several authors (see, e.g., Sapontzis 1984; Ng 1995; Cowen 2003; Nussbaum 2006; Horta 2010a; McMahan 2010; Tomasik 2014), one of the aims that would justify intervening in nature is helping nonhuman animals that live there. Such help could consist in preventing them from suffering a natural harm or in alleviating it when its occurrence is unavoidable. It could also consist in providing animals with some other benefit, thereby making their lives better. Thus, these would be *positive* interventions for animals in the wild. In fact, contrary to what is often believed, the lives of animals that live in the wild are far from being idyllic. As it is pointed out in other papers of this volume (e.g., Faria, Horta; and also Horta 2010a), animals that live in the wild are subjected to a variety of serious and systematic harms which cause most of them to lead short lives full of suffering.

It is true that there are certain natural processes that harm nonhuman animals and regarding which we currently lack the means to intervene effectively. This would be the case of the reproductive strategy followed by the majority of animals ("*r*-selection"), which maximises the chances of survival by increasing the number of offspring while investing a very small amount of parental care. Since, on average, only one individual per parent survives, it follows that most individuals die soon after birth. Usually, they die in painful ways, without having experienced any positive well-being during their entire lives.

In addition, the individuals that survive to adulthood are also exposed to a wide range of natural harms on a daily basis, such as starvation and dehydration, diseases and parasitism or injuries caused by other animals.

Even though we cannot presently intervene to alleviate these harms on a large scale, we do have the means to do it at a medium or small scale. As a matter of fact, it is possible to help (it is already done) some of these animals in need. For example, by providing them with water and food or curing them of injuries and diseases.

From the rejection of speciesism it follows that the aim of helping animals in nature and who are in need justifies intervening in natural processes or altering ecosystems. Speciesism, in its anthropocentric version, is a kind of discrimination which consists in disfavouring the interests of certain individuals on the grounds that they do not belong to the human species (Horta 2010b; Faria and Paez 2014).

The majority of wild animals are, like most humans, sentient beings. That is, they are individuals with the capacity to suffer and enjoy what happens in their lives. Thus, they have a well-being of their own. Many of us would not resist the claim that we would have decisive reasons to intervene in nature if the individuals in need were human beings. In fact, this is what we commonly do, for example, in those cases in which humans are victims of natural disasters.

Since speciesism must be rejected (e.g., Pluhar 1995; Dunayer 2004; Horta 2010b), our attitude regarding the situation of wild animals in need should be the same as when human beings are in similar circumstances.

Thus, from a moral view which takes the interests of all sentient animals into account (human or nonhuman), we have decisive reasons to intervene in nature in order to benefit the animals that live there, whenever we can do it and provided that our intervention is not expected to cause more suffering than the one it aims at reducing.

2. The environmentalist view: between non-intervention and negative intervention

Environmentalist positions endorse a view which is contrary to the one just discussed. They claim that the aim of helping animals in nature does not gives us reasons – or, at least, it does not give us even sufficient reasons – to intervene. We could thus define this position about intervention in nature as the one according to which pursuing certain environmentalist aims (such as the preservation of species or ecosystems or not interfering with natural processes) can justify inflicting harms on sentient nonhuman animals (*negative* intervention) as well as failing to prevent them from experience some harm (*not* carrying out a positive intervention).

We can analyze the environmentalist position about intervention in nature as a conjunction of two different theses:

(a) an *axiological thesis* about the kind of things which are intrinsically valuable, and

(b) a *thesis about the result of the balance of reasons* when intrinsically valuable entities are affected.

Regarding the axiological thesis, it is necessary to clarify in what sense the preservation of species or of ecosystems or the non-interference in natural processes are, according to environmentalism, morally relevant aims. These aims are promoted by environmentalism not because they might be good for human beings. If that were the case, we would be facing a purely anthropocentric theory. That is, bringing about these aims would only be an instrument to achieve the ultimately valuable aim – the satisfaction of human interests. It is not the case either that environmentalism defends (as it is usually believed) that we should preserve species or ecosystems, or abstaining from interfering with natural processes, because that is good for the animals that live in the wild. As we have seen, given the predominance of suffering in nature, concern for the interests of nonhuman individuals does not justify non-intervention. On the contrary, it implies that we should intervene in order to help them.

For environmentalism, the preservation of species or ecosystems, or not interfering with the course of natural processes, are ultimate aims and not the means for achieving some further aim. This is so because, according to this perspective, the existence of these entities or the natural course of these processes is intrinsically valuable and not merely valuable to obtain other outcomes, such as the promotion of the well-being of sentient individuals.

That does not entail that environmentalism is incompatible with the belief that the well-being of sentient individuals is intrinsically valuable. Now regarding the thesis of the balance of reasons, it does entail that if we consider the promotion of well-being to be a morally relevant aim, that will be subordinate to other typical environmentalist aims.

One the one hand, intervention in nature to help wild animals always presupposes an unjustified interference with natural processes. This gives us reasons against intervening. If we endorse an environmentalist theory, either these are our only reasons to act or these reasons are always stronger than the reasons given by the benefit generated by intervention for nonhuman animals in need.

On the other hand, often, respecting or promoting what environmentalism regards as intrinsically valuable requires, alternatively, carrying out certain interventions in ecosystems with the aim of restoring them to a former

state, previous to human intervention. These kind of interventions which further environmentalist aims are defended even when they cause great harm to the animals that live in nature. This happens, for example, when environmentalists support the so-called "ecology of fear", that is, promoting certain biotic relations between predators and prey in order to accomplish certain conservationist aims (Horta 2010d; Faria 2012). The aim is achieved through the reintroduction of predator species in ecosystems where they had long been absent, which implies a great suffering for the animals that are taken as prey.

In what follows, I will criticize both the axiological thesis and the thesis of the balance of reasons implied by environmentalism. My aim is to show that we have reasons to reject them and, with them, the whole environmentalist view about intervention in nature.

3. Objecting to the axiological thesis of the environmentalist view

The axiological thesis of a moral theory refers to what it considers to be valuable as an end, as opposed to what is valuable in a merely derived way, as a means to achieve what is considered ultimately valuable. Different versions of the environmentalist view defend different axiological theses. The importance of the axiological thesis for these different versions of environmentalism resides in that these theories directly derive our moral reasons from what they consider intrinsically valuable. If we discovered that we may refuse to accept these axiologies or, even, that we must reject them, it would follow that we may also refuse to accept the reasons against positive interventions (and for negative interventions) that these different versions of environmentalism derive from them.

It is plausible to claim that any axiology should include, at least, aspects of the well-being of sentient individuals, e.g., how much well-being exists in a state of affairs or how it is distributed. This follows from accepting the moral importance of our own well-being, and from recognising that the failure to attribute a similar importance to the well-being of other individuals can only be the product of an arbitrary restriction. We may use this to ground different normative positions. For example, it could be claimed that, among different alternative courses of action, we must choose the one that produces, on aggregate, greater net positive well-being. If, in addition, equality was included in our axiology, we should also take into account how well-being is distributed among the affected individuals in order to

identify the best alternative. That is, at least one of the things that should morally matter to us in an ultimate sense is how well or badly the life of sentients individuals fares and how they can be positively or negatively affected by our actions or omissions.

To the extent that elements distinct from well-being are introduced in an axiology, the possibility arises that what we ought morally to do does not coincide with what is the best in terms of the aggregation – or of the distribution – of well-being for the sentient individuals affected by our decisions. That is to say that the reasons derived from those other values distinct from well-being may come to justify not to benefit an individual or inflicting her some harm, even if the opposite is what would be morally required solely in terms of well-being.

One may, thus, wonder, what arguments exist for the inclusion of elements distinct from well-being in our axiology. Hence, defenders of the axiological thesis must show:

(a) in general, that it makes sense for something distinct from well-being to have intrinsic value;
(b) in particular, that entities such as species or ecosystems have intrinsic value.

In what follows I will assess three different axiological theories, each from a different environmentalist author, as well as the normative positions that can be derived from them.

3.1. *Albert Schweitzer: reverence for life*

Albert Schweitzer (1994) claims that all living organisms possess a *will to live*. This will to live consists in:

(a) the preference for continuing to live rather than ceasing to exist that all organisms have, and
(b) the desires to experience pleasure and not to experience suffering of all organisms.

According to Schweitzer, all lives with a will to live are intrinsically valuable and they are so to the same degree. If follows from this that human beings have the obligation to procure the satisfaction, and prevent the frustration, of the desires that constitute a will to live. Likewise, this is an obligation we have regarding all living organisms (since all harbour these desires) and that is equally stringent regarding all of them (since all are valuable to the same degree).

This would explain why organisms have intrinsic value. Now, it would also allow us to account for the intrinsic value of species and ecosystems.

To the extent that living organisms are members of species and ecosystems, the intrinsic value of the latter is a function of the intrinsic value of their members.

As we have seen, Schweitzer characterises the will to live in terms of mental states, that is, in terms of desires. If this characterisation is understood in a strict sense, then it is false that all living organisms have a will to live. This is because not all living organisms possess a capacity to have mental states and, therefore, not all of them can entertain the desires in which this will consists. Only sentient individuals can, for instance, desire to experience pleasure or desire not to experience suffering. This way of construing Schweitzer's thesis is indistinguishable from an axiology which claims that what matters is the well-being of individuals, and which believes that what contributes to individual well-being is the satisfaction of desires, whereas what detracts from it is their frustration. But one cannot derive reasons against interventions beneficial to the animals that live in nature, or reasons for negative interventions, from this construal of Schweitzer's view. Similarly to what happens with what I name the antispeciesist view, we are worried about the well-being of all sentient individuals. This entails, again, that we have decisive reasons to intervene in nature in order to help the sentient nonhumans that live there, whenever we can, and when the expected result of our intervention is, in the overall, beneficial for them.

Now we may understand Schweitzer's characterisation of the will to live in terms of "desires" as merely figurative. Certainly, over time, those traits of living organisms have been selected which improved their chances of survival until reproduction. This makes them respond to their environment in a favourable way regarding some stimuli and in an aversive way regarding others, whether they possess or not a capacity to have mental states. This renders intelligible the claim that in a loose sense all organisms "desire" to live, or "desire" to avoid what will harm them. This is the same sense in which we may claim that a river "desires" to flow into the sea. But this is a different sense from the one that implies that there is some individual who possesses certain mental states the frustration or satisfaction of which will have an impact on her well-being. As we have seen, this is only true of sentient individuals. Given the figurative sense in which, under this construal, the term "desire" would be employed, it is mysterious how the will to live might be intrinsically valuable.

Thus, we either understand the will to live to be characterised by a figurative use of "desire", or we understand that this term is employed in a strict sense. In the first case, we can attribute intrinsic value to species and ecosystems, as a function of the intrinsic value of the organisms that are their members. However, there is no consideration whatsoever supporting

the notion that the possession of such "desires" renders an organism intrinsically valuable, nor, therefore, that species or ecosystems are valuable in that way as well.

In the second case, such considerations do exist, though only regarding sentient individuals, since only they can entertain desires in the strict sense which is relevant for well-being. Nevertheless, such a view cannot claim that species or ecosystems have intrinsic value, but only that they have instrumental value: they are valuable or disvaluable insofar as they contribute in a positive or negative way to the well-being of the individuals that are a part of them. Given the predominance of suffering in nature, regarding ecosystems that instrumental value is overwhelmingly negative.

3.2. *Paul W. Taylor: respect for nature*

According to Taylor (1986) all entities with a good, or well-being, of their own have an intrinsic value that must be respected (or using his own phrase, they have an *inherent worth*) [1]. On the one hand, the fact that an entity has a well-being of its own implies that it can be benefited or harmed by what happens to it. On the other hand, the fact that its intrinsic value must be respected implies that we have reasons not to harm entities with a well-being of their own and not to interfere with their activities.

According to this author, organisms are the kind of entity that possesses a well-being if its own, since what happens to them can be good or bad for them (1986, 61-2). In fact, organisms are the *primary* bearers of well-being (71). What is good for an organism, Taylor claims, from the organism's own perspective, is what promotes the aims to which its internal processes and external activities are oriented. Contrariwise, what is bad for an organism, from its own perspective, is what frustrates such aims. Examples of such processes would be the adaptation to the environment, the preservation of the organism's existence or the perpetuation of its species. Thus, an organism possesses a high level of well-being, from the organism's own perspective, when it has successfully adapted to its environment and when it has developed the normal biological functions before dying (66-8).

[1] Certainly, Taylor uses the phrase "inherent worth" (75). However, with this term he refers to a kind of value which is similar to the one I refer to by "intrinsic value": that which is valued as an end, and not merely as a means. It so happens, though, that this author distinguishes between what is valuable as an end independently of the existence of a conscious individual that values it so (inherent worth), from what is valuable in this way only because there is an individual who judges it to be so (the varieties of intrinsic value and inherent value, 73-4).

In this way, we have moral reasons not to harm organisms and to avoid interfering in their activities (72).

Although, as I said, organisms are the primary bearers of well-being (or those who bear well-being in a *non-derivative* way), they are not the only entities of which it can be predicated. Organisms constitute populations or communities that, since they are groupings of primary bearers of well-being, are also *derivative* bearers of it. This implies that we also have reasons not to harm groupings of organisms, such as species or ecosystems, and to avoid interfering in their activities.

Now, Taylor's view rests on the thesis that there is something like an organism's own *perspective*, according to which an event can be good or bad for it. Strictly speaking, though, this is false of organism's in general: there is no such thing as the perspective of a non-sentient organism. Because it lacks a subjective point of view, and a capacity for affective mental states, it is not possible for an event in the world to cause it to have experiences of enjoyment or suffering. In a similar way, it is also impossible, strictly speaking, that it establishes for itself aims that are the contents of desires that can be frustrated or satisfied. Certainly, as was also true in our discussion of Schweitzer, we can speak about an organism's perspective in a figurative way. In that case, our attribution of "aims" to non-sentient organisms (or to the non-conscious processes of organisms) would be, like before, a shortcut to refer to the fact that given the conditions in which individuals' traits have been selected for over time, these have developed a set of survival and reproduction mechanisms. It would then be true that all organisms have a "well-being" in that sense.

Non-sentient organisms, thus, only possess "well-being" in the second, figurative sense, but not in a strict sense. Sentient organisms, for their part, possess well-being in both senses. This is problematic. As it was suggested above, it would be implausible to claim that individuals' well-being, strictly speaking, is not valuable and that, therefore – assuming a normative stance which is common to all the authors that are here being discussed – we do not have reasons to promote it. If, furthermore, we believe that "well-being" in Taylor's figurative sense is valuable as well, we will also derive from that fact reasons to promote it. The problem is that the maximisation of well-being in Taylor's sense is conceptually distinct from the maximisation of well-being in a strict sense. The aims of adapting to the environment and realisation of reproductive functions before death are logically independent from the promotion of the well-being of an individual. In addition, in our world, these are incompatible aims. What on aggregate maximises adaptation to the environment and reproductive success are precisely natural processes responsible for the predominance of suffering in nature.

Let us assume for the sake of the argument that "well-being" in Taylor's figurative sense has normative importance. Since regarding sentient organisms each one of these two considerations (well-being in a strict sense and well-being in a figurative sense) would give us moral reasons pointing to opposite directions, we must determine which is morally weightier. To that end, we can think about which one we believe that ought to prevail in case that the living organisms at issue were human beings. We would either claim that well-being in a subjective sense always prevails over well-being in Taylor's sense, or that the latter lacks any normative relevance.

Unless we are speciesist, we must extend this conclusion to those cases in which what we are considering is the situation of nonhuman sentient individuals. These are precisely the cases in which we are considering whether to help the animals that live in nature. Even if it were true that the best we could do is to let nature follow its course, because that is what would maximise on aggregate the "well-being" of organisms in Taylor's sense, that is incompatible with what is best for the well-being, in a strict sense, of sentient individuals. In this way, we would still have decisive reasons to intervene in nature with the aim of helping them, and whenever the expected result is net positive. The alleged reasons against doing so based on the intrinsic value of organisms, or of groupings of organisms like species or ecosystems, are either always weaker than those based on the well-being of individuals in a strict sense, or non-existent.

3.3. *J. Baird Callicott: the inherent value of biotic communities*

Until now, I have employed the term "intrinsic value" to refer to the value which something has as an end, as opposed to the value it can have as a means to obtain further things which are indeed valued as ends. In his work, however, Callicott prefers to speak of "inherent value" to refer to an axiological category with identical normative implications [2].

Callicott starts with the observation that human beings possess an affective constitution with a capacity for such moral feelings as sympathy, loyalty or patriotism. Given our affective constitution, there are certain objects which arouse those feelings, thus becoming recipients of inherent value. Through the process of natural selection, this constitution of affec-

[2] Actually, Callicott distinguishes between "intrinsic value" and "inherent value". Though both refer to the evaluation of something as an end, the first is "objetive and independent of all valuing consciousness" (1989, 161), whereas the second "is not independent of all valuing consciousness" (ibid.). With respect to my argument, however, this distinction is inconsequential.

tions has been standardised among all members of the human species, producing a "consensus of feelings" (1989, 164). It is possible that we fail to attribute inherent value to some entities not because they are unfit objects of value, but simply because of an epistemic mistake: we ignore that they possess certain attributes, possessed as well by the entities we consider to be inherently valuable, and which are precisely the ones that make them proper objects of valuation. Whenever this happens, what we must do, for the sake of consistency, is to include them in the set of entities to which we give inherent value. Thus, for instance, in the beginning we valued in an inherent way those human beings that belonged to our community. After discovering that other human beings, given the properties which they share with the members of our community, are also proper objects of our moral feelings, the right thing to do is to also attribute inherent value to them.

According to Callicott, if we reason from the facts about which ecology informs us, we must recognise that other entities are also the proper objects of our moral feelings (1989, 162-3). In the first place, nonhuman natural entities, insofar as members, just like human beings, of the same biotic community, are the proper object of the feelings of sympathy or benevolence. In the second place, nature as a whole, insofar as the great biotic community to which we belong, is the proper object of the moral feeling of loyalty.

This argument for the extension of our moral feelings from other human beings to biotic communities and their members assumes that the latter share with the former the properties which are relevant with regard to those feelings. Certainly, other sentient beings (be they human or not) are proper objects of feelings such as sympathy or benevolence because they have a well-being of their own. In this way, they have the capacity to suffer and to enjoy what happens in their lives, so that they can be positively and negatively affected by our actions. What is morally appropriate is to have favourable disposition towards what is good for them and a contrary one towards what is detrimental for them. Similarly, communities of sentient beings (be they human or not) can be proper objects of feelings such as loyalty. Actions that have consequences on the community as a whole or a part of it can have a positive or negative impact on the sentient individuals who are their members. A disposition such as loyalty can be useful insofar as it moves us to act, with respect to the community, in the ways that benefit to the greatest extent those that compose it.

However, none of that is true of non-sentient entities and the communities we may consider them to compose. This is because they cannot be benefited or harmed by our actions, since these are entities that lack a capacity to be positively or negatively affected by what happens to them.

Due to all that, it does not follow, contrary to Callicott, that biotic communities (and, hence, species or ecosystems) and their non-sentient members are proper objects of our moral feelings and that, therefore, we must also consider them as inherently valuable.

4. Objecting to the thesis of the balance of reasons

It follows from the analysis in the previous section that none of the authors discussed manages to develop a plausible argument for the intrinsic (or inherent) value of species or ecosystems. Under the assumption that no other argument, different from those presented here, would be persuasive, we can conclude that we have no reasons to include these entities as basic elements in our axiology.

It is, indeed, possible to object that such an assumption may prove to be unjustified. Now even in that case, that would not be sufficient to support the environmentalist view against positive interventions and for negative interventions in nature. Additionally, it is necessary for a further thesis, independent to these axiologies, to be also justified – the thesis of the balance of reasons:

> *Thesis of the balance*: at least on some occasions, the reasons derived from the value of species or ecosystems are stronger than the reasons derived from what is better for the sentient beings who would be affected by our decision. In these cases, it would be justified to choose an alternative that is worse for those sentient beings because it is the best one for the affected species or ecosystems.

Given that speciesism is an unjustified prejudice, the thesis of the balance must hold whatever the species of the sentient beings affected by our decision, that is, be they human or nonhuman. For all those cases regarding which we believe that the intrinsic value of species or ecosystems gives us decisive reasons against helping nonhumans living in nature we could find analogous cases in which the individuals in need are human beings.

Rejecting speciesism and accepting the thesis of the balance leads us to conclude that in none of those cases such individuals ought to be helped. This is clearly unacceptable regarding the cases in which those who need our intervention are human beings. Since our treatment of nonhuman interests in a similar situation must be the same, the implications that accepting the thesis of the balance would have for them should also seem to us unacceptable. Our only alternative is, then, to reject as well the thesis of the balance.

5. Conclusion

The environmentalist view, as defined in this paper, claims that the preservation of certain natural entities (such as species or ecosystems) or the non-interference with natural processes can justify both inflicting some harm to sentient nonhuman animals (*negative* intervention) and failing to prevent them from suffering some harm (not carrying out a *positive* intervention).

However, if my argument is sound, then the environmentalist position is not justified. Firstly, we do not have reasons to accept an axiology which, along with the well-being of sentient individuals, incorporates other entities as intrinsically valuable. Secondly, even if we accepted such an axiology, we should reject the thesis that, after the balance of reasons, the reasons given by the value of these entities might be stronger than the reasons given by the well-being of sentient individuals. Thus, the mere aim of preserving species or ecosystems or of avoiding interfering with natural processes (a) cannot even give us sufficient reasons to inflict some harm to sentient individuals and (b) cannot even give us sufficient reasons against preventing them from suffering some harm or against mitigating some harm they will suffer.

Now from an antispeciesist view, which takes the interests of all sentient animals into account, whether they are human or not, what matters most is how their well-being is affected by our actions and omissions. It follows from this view that we have decisive reasons against performing negative interventions in nature (those with an expected net negative value for nonhuman animals). Similarly, it implies that, whenever it is in our power to do so, and if the intervention is expected to bring about more benefits than harms, we have decisive reasons to intervene in nature with the aim of helping the animals that live there.

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