

**KANTIAN WHOLISM: TOWARD  
A CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC**  
Presidential Address

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*Introduction*

Kant's ethic is rejected by most environmental ethicists. A frequent claim made by environmental ethicists, especially those in the deep ecology movement, is that Western ethics--the so-called Judeo-Christian-Platonic-Aristotelian tradition--has been dominated by "an extreme subjectivist anthropocentrism in which the whole of non-human nature is viewed as a resource for man [sic]."<sup>1</sup> Kant is criticized as being traditionally anthropocentric since, for Kant, only rational beings (which for our ecosphere effectively means only human beings) are ends in themselves and, therefore, all other beings are means to ends and at most only indirectly morally considerable.<sup>2</sup> Most environmentalists regard anthropocentric views to be opposed to any adequate wholistic, life-centered ecological ethic.<sup>3</sup>

What I argue in this paper is that a Kantian-type environmental ethic is possible when Kant is supplemented by insights from recent ecological science. The resulting synthesis could be labelled "Kantian wholism" or "eco-humanism."<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I briefly analyze both Kantian ethics and environmental wholism. Then I propose a synthesis of the two.

*Critical Kantianism*

Critical Kantianism (also called humanism or personalism) is the view that the only absolute, categorical, and nonarbitrary value is rationally autonomous persons. Because they are capable of formulating universally necessary moral duties (or laws) regarding values, ends, instruments, motives, attitudes, intentions, conduct, and character traits, rationally autonomous persons have unconditional, categorical value. By virtue of their rational autonomy, such beings have the ability to choose their own ends--they are their own lawgivers. Although one might selfishly and prudentially want

to be egoistic, egoism is logically self-contradictory since conceivably one's own egoistic actions and desires eventually will conflict with others' egoistic actions and desires. By nonegoistically treating all rationally autonomous beings as ends in themselves, one can consistently maintain one's own status as a rationally autonomous moral being and that of all like beings. Such moral beings ought not to be treated merely as means to others' ends since to do so would result in self-contradiction; in other words, upon pain of self-contradiction, all rationally autonomous persons should treat all other rationally autonomous persons as free moral agents who can rationally deliberate and choose their values, formulate goals, and act to achieve those goals. To treat someone as a mere means is to treat them as a thing, as something lacking in rational autonomy. Metaethically, a "moral being" is a "rationally autonomous person."<sup>5</sup>

From this metaethical foundation, normative implications result when such beings act and value in an actual sociocultural context. Since morality is grounded in rational autonomy: actions and character traits are morally obligatory to the extent that they tend to enhance or develop one's own or others' rational autonomy, and actions and character traits are morally prohibited to the extent that they tend to limit or defeat one's own or others' rational autonomy. Such actions and traits are thus "objectively" obligatory (or prohibited). Precisely what actions and traits would be objectively and morally obligatory (or prohibited) will in principle vary from person to person and from one sociocultural situation to another, although certain virtues and abilities, such as, respect for others' autonomy and development of one's rational abilities, will be universally required. These actions and traits are also universal in the sense that all persons in exactly the same context ought so to act and so to be.

Based on this Kantian-type metaethical and normative position, it follows that merely sentient, nonrational beings and "nature" are not intrinsically valuable. Their *moral* value is solely located in the extent to which they promote (or inhibit) rationally autonomous beings *and* in the extent to which they are nonmorally valued by rationally autonomous beings. If there were no rationally autonomous valuers, there would be no value. The pleasures and pains of lower animals are not

morally valuable in themselves, and no natural wonder--whether forest, lake, canyon, or animal species--is *morally* valuable. These nonmoral things *become* objects of moral concern only to the extent that they are valued by rationally autonomous persons and to the extent that they objectively contribute to the self-enhancement and self-destruction of rationally autonomous persons.

### *Environmental Wholism*

Environmental wholism is the view that what has value is not the individual but the whole, the biosphere, the totality of things and systems in the natural order. Everything is in some sense morally relevant, not just indirectly as it relates to human persons but directly. To use Aldo Leopold's term, "the land" is of ultimate value, and the land is the collective total composed of soil, water, plants, animals, rocks, air, and humans.<sup>6</sup> Normatively: acts are right if they tend to promote the integrity, beauty, diversity, and harmony of the whole; otherwise, they are wrong.

Wholism is non-anthropocentric if not anti-anthropocentric. In contrast, anthropocentric, humanistic approaches treat ecosystems as resource values to be exploited for human ends. A scientifically enlightened humanist would have no reason not to use the planet as a mere resource according to long-term ecological science and according to the highest humanistic values.

Although usually understood to be collective, wholism can also be distributive. In the distributive form, all individual things separately and in themselves are considered to be moral entities, whether moral agents or patients, including even those entities that are not alive, sentient, personal, human, or divine. Every individual biotic component is seen to be in some sense intrinsically valuable.<sup>7</sup>

There are at least two ways to endorse the intrinsic value of every individual entity. First, metaphysically everything can be considered to be a "mind," as in Leibniz and Whitehead. Or, second, every individual entity can in some sense be an ideal, as in ideal utilitarianism, such as that once held by G. E. Moore.<sup>8</sup> Both approaches are highly speculative and ultimately not very ecologically helpful since significant problems remain. One must still ask, to a Whiteheadian, *why* and *to what*

*extent* lower unconscious mentalities are valuable. To an ideal utilitarian, the problem is *why* a world apart from any self-conscious observer is valuable. Moreover, for both approaches, conflicts are inevitable and a normative line must be drawn dividing species or individuals into categories of higher and lower value. Because rationality is necessary for self-conscious autonomy and because mental states of pleasure and pain are respectively good and bad, rationality and sentience would still seem to be the appropriate *moral* points of demarcation. The claim that nonsentient entities are intrinsically valuable is meaningful only in the context of these or similar metaphysical theories. In other theories, nonsentient entities could be inherently<sup>9</sup> or instrumentally valuable, but they would not be intrinsically valuable since only the experiences and mental states of sentient or self-conscious rational beings would be intrinsically valuable.

Perhaps the best defense of collective wholism is in *Philosophy Gone Wild* (1986), a collection of fifteen previously published papers by Holmes Rolston, III. By metaethically denying the is-ought fallacy, Rolston argues for a resurgent naturalistic ethic in which morality is derivative from the wholistic character of the ecosystem. "Substantive values," Rolston contends, "emerge only as something empirical is specified as the locus of value."<sup>10</sup> Like it or not, all values are objectively grounded and supported by the possibilities and limitations within the earth's ecosystem. Although the concepts of value essential to wholism, namely, beauty, stability, and integrity, are perhaps nonnatural, all values are a product of the interrelationship and interaction of human persons with an objective environment. What counts as beauty, stability, and integrity emerges from the interaction of world and concept. Rather than being located solely in human persons, values are collectively relocated in human persons in the environment. The value of the ecosystem is not imposed on it but is discovered already to be there: "we find that the character, the empirical content, of order, harmony, stability is drawn from, no less than brought to, nature."<sup>11</sup> The moral "ought" is not *derived* from an "is" but is "discovered simultaneously with it."<sup>12</sup>

Rolston rejects the anthropocentric view that ecology is merely enlightened and expanded human self-interest. We

preserve the environment, not because it is in our best long-term economic, aesthetic, and spiritual self-interest, but because there is no firm boundary between what is essentially human and what is essentially ecosystem. Human and environmental interests merge; egoism becomes "ecoism." Since the boundary between the individual and the ecosystem is diffuse, "we cannot say whether value in the system or in the individual is logically prior."<sup>13</sup>

A scientific ecological fact, Rolston continues, is that complex life forms evolve and survive only in complex and diversified ecosystems. If "human" as we know it is to survive, we must maintain the oceans, forests, and grasslands. To convert the entire planet into cultivated fields and cities would destroy human life. We also ought to preserve the ecosystem to enable the further evolution of the planet, including that of human mental and cultural life.<sup>14</sup>

Normatively, Rolston maintains, right actions are those that preserve ecosystemic beauty, stability, and integrity. Preserving the ecosystemic status quo, however, may not be entailed because humans can improve and transform the environment.

But this should complement the beauty, integrity, and stability of the planetary biosystem, not do violence to it. There ought to be some rational showing that the alteration is enriching; that values are sacrificed for greater ones.<sup>15</sup>

Borrowing a metaphor from contemporary physics, Rolston holds that integrity is a function of a "field" interlocking species and individuals, predation and symbiosis, construction and destruction, aggradation and degradation. Since human life support is part of the ecosystem, domestication is enjoined in order maximally to utilize the ecosystem. Biosystemic welfare allows alteration, management, and use. "What ought to be does not invariably coincide with what is."<sup>16</sup>

Regarding species, Rolston contends that our duties are to the species as forms of life rather than to the individual members of the species. The species is the form; whereas, the individual re-presents the form. "The dignity resides in the dynamic form; the individual inherits this, instantiates it, and passes it on."<sup>17</sup> Biologically and ecologically, the individual is

subordinate to the species. Although extinctions do occur in nature, natural ones are open-ended, usually producing diversification, new species, and ecological trade-offs. In contrast, human extinctions are dead ends destroying diversity and producing monocultures. Species are essential to continuing evolution, and duties toward species begin when human conduct endangers species. Unless preserved *in situ* in their ecosystems, species will not be preserved and evolution will halt.

Turning now to an evaluation of wholism, William K. Frankena makes six criticisms, some aimed at Rolston and some at other types of wholism.<sup>18</sup> First, a subtle egoism can underly wholism. As a dependent part of the whole, the individual may be ecologically altruistic as a means to egoistic gratification. Second, from the moral point of view, only sentient and self-conscious rational beings are morally considerable.

. . . I can see that we ought to consider animals that are capable of pleasure and pain, as well as human beings and/or persons. I cannot, however, see in the same way, at least not without further argument, that we ought morally to consider unconscious animals, plants, rocks, etc.<sup>19</sup>

Unless the whole as such is sentient and conscious, we have no moral grounds to consider it. Third, if the whole is sentient and conscious, either as a person or God, then what matters is ultimately its "mind," which is a type of egoism similar to some types of theism. Fourth, the value concepts of beauty, integrity, balance, etc., are *inherent* values possessed as objects of contemplation by minds like ours, and the values are not intrinsically in the whole but only in relation to us. Moreover, even if the beauty and integrity are not dependent on the observer, *morally* we ought to do something about them *only if* and insofar as they affect minds like ours, present or future. Fifth, if the wholism is grounded in mysticism, nature can be pantheistic, pessimistic, or unreal illusion. In addition, if human actions do not affect that ultimate reality, no ethic can be derived therefrom. Finally, although they are the best types

of wholism, community-centered ethical theories, including ecosystemic-biotic ecologies, are based on two much debated claims: 1) the claim that the value of the community is *not reducible* to the value of its component entities, *but* the community value at the same time depends on those entities and their distribution; and 2) the claim that the value of the community ought to be maximized even if it lessens the value of the component entities or individuals. Although these two claims have not been shown to be false, they have also not been shown to be true. Frankena concludes:

I see how a community can have an instrumental or even an inherent value . . . that is not reducible to those of its members. . . . I do not see, however, how anything can have intrinsic value except the activities, experiences, and lives of conscious sentient beings (persons, etc.). Thus I also do not see how a community can have intrinsic value over and above that contained in the lives of its members, unless it is itself a conscious sentient being or mind--something that I find hard to believe.<sup>20</sup>

In an exaggerated attack on environmental wholism, Tom Regan makes two criticisms. First, pejoratively labelling wholism "environmental fascism," Regan states: "Like political fascism, where 'the good of the state' supercedes 'the good of the individual,' what wholism gives us is a fascist understanding of the environment."<sup>21</sup> Regan thinks wholism entails sacrificing masses of individual humans to preserve wild grasses and rare flowers. But because individuals have rights, wholism fails. Regan's second objection is that it is empirically impossible to know the consequences of our actions for the whole biosphere. Such estimates defy our abilities.

Regan's two criticisms are straw dolls. Very few wholistic environmentalists would sacrifice humans for plants; and, despite being unable to calculate the exhaustive results of some actions, numerous other activities have clear-cut consequences. Should we not make the best estimates that we can? Perhaps Regan would have us do nothing.

Rolston's position has answers to most but not all of Frankena's criticisms. Rolston's wholism is not egoistic, mystical, pantheistic, or panentheistic. The whole ecosystem is

neither alive nor a mind. Moreover, Rolston's insistence that human individuals, concepts, and values emerge together naturalistically out of the environment addresses the alleged conflicts between the individual and the environment, between nonnaturally-based (human) concepts of value and environmentally-based values. Rolston's claim that what is good for the environment is generally good for human individuals is explicitly a mixed empirical and metaethical claim. As a general principle, it is probably true; and, Rolston recognizes that it has exceptions--humans can improve the environment. But, given the overpopulation, industrial exploitation, and environmental abuses of today, conflicts are occurring and sacrifices must be made. If we do not make the sacrifices, future generations will inherit an exponentially worse situation. Since we are closer to the abuses and have benefited more from them, should we not make the sacrifices?

Frankena's insistence that only sentient and self-conscious rational beings are intrinsically valuable and morally considerable is well-taken. However, even if the ecosystem is only inherently and instrumentally valuable, an ecological ethic still results. Morally responsible persons ought not wantonly to destroy or waste anything of value--especially inherently and instrumentally valuable environments that contribute to the essential being and identity of the persons within them.

#### *Kantian Wholism*

From Kantianism and wholism, two values respectively result: 1) self-conscious rationally autonomous persons, and 2) collective wholistic ecosystems. Both values are "categorical" (or unconditional) in the Kantian sense that the denial of either produces rational self-contradiction. All self-conscious rational beings must ascribe to both on pain of self-contradiction. Both values are also "naturalistic" in Rolston's sense of emerging nonreductionistically and complementarily out of the natural wholistic environment. Because we *are* our environment, to harm the environment is to harm ourselves, and no rationally autonomous person can consistently will to harm oneself. To harm the environment is to destroy the basis of one's own rationality and identity. The ethic resulting from this synthesis could be called "Kantian wholism" or "eco-humanism."

In this synthesis, self-conscious rationally autonomous persons are in principle incommensurable deontological values; whereas, wholistic ecosystems are in principle commensurable teleological values. In other words, all self-conscious rationally autonomous persons have two duties: 1) the duty to treat all other persons as ends and never merely as means, and 2) the duty to maximize ecological beauty, stability, and integrity. This mixture of deontological and teleological elements makes this proposal at most a "Kantian-type" normative solution--a mixed deontological theory.

When these two values conflict, as they currently do due to overpopulation and economic exploitation, deontological considerations generally should have priority over teleological ones; that is, persons generally should not be used as mere means to ends, even to achieve the survival of other persons and of ecosystems. The status of self-conscious rationally autonomous persons as self-determining moral agents requires that in principle all sacrifices be voluntary self-sacrifices. Although ecosystems may be *inherently* valuable apart from human experiences, the values become actual only when experienced by persons. All values are conceptually dependent on self-conscious rationally autonomous persons. Hence, Kantian wholism is primarily deontological and secondarily teleological.

Individuals *qua* individuals are incommensurably valuable only when they are self-conscious rationally autonomous persons. Nonrational and non-self-conscious individuals are not relevantly unique; one is as good as another. At lower levels, what must be preserved are species and species populations, which are necessary for ecological balance and evolution. Individuals of lower abilities are instantiations of their species-form such that one individual is as valuable as another, except when human social attachments (such as pets) and instrumental factors (such as trained draft animals) apply. Although not absolutely valuable due to their nonrationality, lower species are still exceedingly valuable due to their importance for ecological beauty, diversity, integrity, and stability. Our duty, therefore, is to preserve species populations in ecosystems, which duty does not prohibit

domesticating and using individual plants and animals for human or ecological ends, such as, food, clothing, labor, and medicine, provided the integrity of the ecosystem and of species populations is maintained. Regardless of its level of existence, no individual life ought to be wantonly and unnecessarily destroyed since such acts are ecologically harmful and wasteful. Although merely sentient animals are not rational and hence not absolutely valuable as individuals, they can suffer and, therefore, ought not needlessly to be allowed to suffer or to be inflicted with pain. They ought always to be treated humanely and, when justifiable, killed mercifully.

#### Conclusion

A synthesis of critical Kantianism and environmental wholism produces a morally plausible and ecologically responsible ethic. The fundamental claim of this ethic is that it is irrationally *self-destructive* for rationally autonomous *selves* to act so as to destroy the eco-human basis of their rational *self-identity*. Ecological balance is necessary for both human survival and human self-identity. Unless we foolishly destroy ourselves, as we currently are in process of doing, some type of environment will always obtain. This environment will always to some extent determine the essential nature of our being. Since we are animals evolved within ecosystems, we must preserve these environments or else we destroy ourselves materially and essentially. Our values are at least to some extent objectively natural. But we are both in and outside nature; we can adapt to an amazing variety of environments and drastically reconstruct both our own natures and our natural environment. We can act to improve or destroy nature; we can live in a technological maze or a natural wilderness; we can surround ourselves with concrete and steel or with living plants and animals. Normatively, based on the proposed Kantian-type wholism, our acts ought to enhance our own self-conscious rational autonomy by enhancing wholistic eco-human values.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>George Sessions, "Spinoza and Jeffers on Man and Nature," *Inquiry* 20 (1977): 482. See David Ehrenfeld, *The*

*Arrogance of Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Bill Devall and George Sessions, "The Development of Natural Resources and the Integrity of Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (Winter 1984): 293-322; Arne Naess, "A Defense of the Deep Ecology Movement," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (Fall 1984): 265-70; and Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 129-56.

<sup>2</sup>Louis G. Lombardi, "Inherent Worth, Respect, and Rights," *Environmental Ethics* 5 (Fall 1983): 258; Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 45-52; and Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 174-85.

<sup>3</sup>Richard A. Watson, "A Critique of Anti-Anthropocentric Biocentrism," *Environmental Ethics* 5 (Fall 1983): 245-56.

<sup>4</sup>The term "eco-humanism" is proposed by William Aiken in "Ethical Issues in Agriculture," in *Earthbound: New Introductory Essays in Environmental Ethics*, ed. Tom Regan (New York: Random House, 1984), 264-85.

<sup>5</sup>See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

<sup>6</sup>Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

<sup>7</sup>William K. Frankena, "Ethics and the Environment," in *Ethics and Problems in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. K. E. Goodpaster and K. M. Sayre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 11-12.

<sup>8</sup>George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 83-84, 183-225.

<sup>9</sup>The term "inherent" value was proposed by C. I. Lewis in *The Ground and Nature of the Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 69, to refer to an entity's *capacity*

to contribute something of value; that is, another being's *experience* or *contemplation* of the entity is intrinsically good or rewarding but the entity in itself is not intrinsically valuable. All values of nonsentient beings would seem to be either instrumental or inherent in Lewis' sense. The inherent values are the values that the things have in relation to *self-conscious* beings--on being experienced or contemplated--and not values the things have in and by themselves. See Frankena, 13.

<sup>10</sup>Holmes Rolston, III, *Philosophy Gone Wild* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986), 19.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 22-24.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>18</sup>Frankena, 14-17.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>21</sup>Tom Regan, "Ethical Vegetarianism and Commercial Animal Farming," in *Today's Moral Problems*, 3d ed., ed. Richard A. Wasserstrom (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1985), 475-76.