Understanding the Human-Nature Relationship through Personalist Philosophy

Anthony Cashio

University of Virginia's College at Wise

I

This paper explores the value of personal reciprocal relationships with nonhuman nature by arguing that applying a personalist philosophy to environmental thinking can be theoretically and practically beneficial for both. By emphasizing the value of relationships themselves personalism can expand its notion of community and personhood to include relations with nonhuman nature. Further, through this approach, environmental philosophy has a way to account for the ethical values of ecological wholes that does not devalue the dignity of the person. As such, the two philosophical approaches, while they might seem initially at odds, have much to learn from each other.

There have been several attempts to demonstrate that personalism and environmental philosophy are not as incompatible as they might first appear. Both Frederick Ferre's "Personalism and the Dignity of Nature" and John H. Lavely's "Personalism Supports the Dignity of Nature" explore the possibility of using Personalistic Idealism, exemplified by Borden Parker Bowne and Edgar Brightman, as a ground for understanding the dignity and value of nature.[1] Building off these two essays John Howie, in "Can Personalism Provide a Theoretical Basis for an Environmental Ethic?," argues that personalism must address several questions raised by environmental ethics such as, "Can the whole of nature be understood as simply of instrumental value to human persons" and "Can entire ecosystems be considered the focus of intrinsic or inherent value?"[2] The problem, as Howie notes, is that, "Personalism has often allied itself with the traditional Christian view that insists upon the preeminence of human being in the natural order of things."[3] As most environmental ethicists are at pains to demonstrate, such a strong value distinction between humans and nature is at the very heart of most of our environmental issues.[4] In "Is a Personalist Ethic Necessarily Anthropocentric?," Joseph Selling, emphasizing a continental approach, takes this problem head on. As he argues, if personalism is fundamentally anthropocentric, then it is open to criticism

from environmental ethicists. Personalism would not only fail to hold up to the theoretical demands of environmental philosophy, it would be downright dangerous.

Drawing upon the dialogical aspects of personalism, as exemplified in Martin Buber's analysis of the "I-You" relationship, this paper adds to these discussions by arguing that an "I-You" approach to the environment can help to both deepen and repair our *moral* relationship with nonhuman nature.[5] While Buber is not traditionally classified as a personalist (or an environmentalist) I hold that in his framework of the "I-You" we have the grounds for expanding both our concept of the person and our concept of the environment. In the framework of the "I-You" our interactions with others have a reciprocal effect upon us. Degradation of another person is, in a very important way, degradation of the self. Applying a personalist approach to nature takes debate beyond discussions about anthropocentrism and focuses environmental philosophical concerns on ways in which our active relation with nonhuman nature can be a source of positive value.

II

Some personalist philosophers find environmental ethics to be unsound. In his essay, Ferre notes that any environmental ethic must "take into consideration any value claims besides those made *on behalf of human beings*."[6] The problem, as Ferre highlights, is that this idea of nonanthropocentric value runs counter to a crucial premise of traditional western ethical thought: only those entities capable of reason have intrinsic value. Kant, he observes, makes a sharp distinction between persons and things on just this point:

> Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on Nature's, have…if they are nonrational beings, only a relative value as means, and are therefore called *things*; rational beings, on the contrary, are called *persons*, because their nature points them out as ends in themselves."[7]

Kant's influence is strong, especially in personalist philosophy, and if his assessment holds then environmental philosophy is theoretically misguided.

More recently Rufus Burrow has wondered "whether the recent emphasis on environmental ethics is just another fad introduced by progressive white scholars, professionals, and students as a way of redirecting attention, energy, and resources away from socioeconomic and political policies and practices that continue to destroy massive numbers of persons of color."[8] It is problematic that so much academic time and energy has been spent discussing the value of the nonhuman world when there are still persons that suffer from poverty and indignity. If Burrow is correct, then environmental ethics is not only theoretically unsound but an immoral distraction. Fortunately much work has been done, especially by ecofeminists, to demonstrate that those values structures that degrade minorities and the impoverished are the same that lead to environmental degradation.

Given what seems to be a fundamental incompatibility between the two philosophies, why bring them into conversation? There are at least two reasons. First, both

philosophies have much to offer in helping us approach, interpret, and act within the world. Second, I hold that by bringing them together, both philosophies are expanded and strengthened.

One of personalism's strengths is that it relies upon a description of the person that is culturally and historically contextualized.[9] As such, personalism is "continuously open to new experience and insight."[10] By giving supreme value to the person, a personalist philosophy fights against any attempt to reduce or objectify the personal subject to an impersonal object. This demand that all persons be granted the dignity and respect that they deserve is, perhaps, the greatest metaphysical and ethical contribution of any version of personalism.

Environmental philosophy also struggles against devaluation. An example is Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic. The Land Ethic claims that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong with it tends to otherwise."[11] While this seems straight like forward ethic, its implications place a radical strain on the traditional western ethical framework. The land ethic, as Leopold puts it, "enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."[12] To hold to an environmental ethic is to hold to values outside anthropocentric concerns. This push to reconceive of what it means to be a member of a community is one of the great strengths and challenges of any environmental philosophy.

Approaching environmental philosophy through personalism fosters an expansive conception of the person and their relationship to the community without falling into the potential traps of ecoholism. By bringing the two philosophies into dialogue, we find a way to understand the person's important relation with the nonhuman natural world that does not reduce the world to an anthropocentric collection of individuals. At the same time, taking the philosophies together preserves what is important and special about pershonhood. As such, basic philosophical demands of both personalism and environmental philosophy are met in a way that not only maintains the basic insights of both but also expands upon and strengthens these claims. The dignity of personhood is maintained and an understanding of nature as valuable apart from humanity is upheld.

III

An important common theme between personalism and environmental philosophy is the emphasis both place upon relations within a community. It is on this point that Martin Buber's analysis of the "I-You" can be the most illuminating.

We need not delve too deeply into Buber's philosophy to see how his distinction between the attitudes of "I-It" and "I-You" is a simple, yet powerful, tool for explaining the moral content and value of our relationships. Buber claims that "the attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak."[13] The basic word pairs Buber employs are "I-It" and "I-You." Buber claims that in these relationships the individual person, or the "I" is different in the "I-It" and the "I-You" relationship.[14] For Buber the "I" has no individual personality outside of one of these basic attitudes. To say "I" is to speak either from the perspective of the "It" or the "You." And, when

we *say* "It" or "You," we are also speaking from the perspective of a particular "I." The attitude that we take towards the world *is* the attitude that we take towards ourselves.

The realm of the "It" is the realm of subject-object relation. This means that "The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being."[15] When, "I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I think something." I am existing merely in the realm of the "It." The realm of the "You," on the other hand, moves us beyond these boundaries. The "I-You" attitude is harder to comprehend because as Buber explains, "Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing but stands in relation."[16]

This description becomes ethical when we treat another person as an "It." Failure to recognize the full personhood of the other, to stand in direct relation to them as a "You," is not only a degradation of their personhood but also a degradation of one's own personhood. Such an insight is central to many personalist philosophies. There are, of course, many parallels here with Kantian ethical analysis of means and ends-in-themselves. For Kant, one has a duty to treat others as ends-in-themselves. Yet, the recognition of the personhood of another and the moral obligations that come with this can still be carried out from the attitude of "I-It." One can have interactions with another person that fulfill all ethical obligations and still not have a positive moral relationship with the other. In the attitude of the "I-You," Buber moves beyond duties to persons to cultivation and care for the moral content of relations themselves. In the "I-It," both parties can have value in-themselves; both parties can act to fulfill obligations to the other person. In the "I-You," it is the relationship itself that is valuable. And, given Buber's analysis, it is only in the attitude of this relationship that both parties can find immediate fulfillment of their personhood.

For Buber there are three spheres in which we can enter into relation: life with nature, life with men, and life with spiritual beings. To distinguish between an "I-It" and "I-You" attitude in the sphere of life with nature, Buber invites us to contemplate a tree. From the framework of the "I-It" one can experience the tree from a myriad of perspectives. We can view it as an aesthetic object; we can study its biological functions; or, we can go farther and recognize it as the expression of a law and as a pure relation among numbers. Yet, "Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition."[17] We can, however, be drawn into a relation with the tree. In this relation we grasp all that belongs to the tree in its entirety, "The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it."[18] This personal encounter with the tree requires no conscious agency on the part of the tree. What is met in the tree is not something transcendent or otherworldly but rather the entirety of all the relations of the tree. Buber writes, "What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself."[19] The tree is both relation and whole, individual and community. In grasping this, we grasp our own personhood in the same manner.

There is no reason, other than arbitrary bias, to think that the encounter one can have with a tree cannot also be applied to other ecological wholes. In this way, we find that the "I-You" counters Kant's depersonalization of nature. Reason and conscious activity are not the only arbiters of ethical worth. The main criteria is whether or not we can say "You" to the other entity. The value of the relationship hinges upon the

"I" and the persons willingness to find positive value through care and attention to a "You."

IV

Thus, not only is personalism compatible with an environmental philosophy, bringing the two together helps solve some of the theoretical challenges found in both philosophies. Personalism moves away from the Christian/Cartesian roots that have demonstratively led to a value-structure that has had direct negative impact upon all levels of the global ecosystem. Environmental holism is often accused of a willingness to sacrifice the members of a biotic community for the greater good of the whole. The personalist approach to community I am suggesting circumvents standard debates about the locus of value by emphasizing the value of dialogical relationships. It is misleading to interpret an "I-You" relationship as anthropocentric. However, it is also incorrect to argue that it is nonanthropocentric. Rather, value is found in the personal relation. If a label is needed it might be, as Brian Norton calls it, "weakly anthropocentric."[20]

An "I-It" approach to nature still allows for ethical duties to nature. The obligation to restore and preserve an ecosystem can still be approached from the standpoint of an objective relation. Indeed, such objective distance is functionally necessary if we are to have an ecologically informed understanding of how to best act and interact with an ecosystem. But, as long as our relation to nature is through an "I-It" dialogue there will always be a distancing of the individual from the biotic community. And, if Buber is correct, this distancing will be reflected in the very composition of the "I". The person will always be unnecessarily separated from the Land.[21]

The "I-You" relationship does not replace the ethical rights and obligations of the "I-It" with regard to nonhuman nature. Rather, it is an opening up of the person to the positive values actualized in the performance of these duties. That is, in carrying out our ethical obligations to the Land we find that we enter into dialogue with the environment. This is not a subsumtion of the person into the whole, but rather the recognition of the dignity of one's own personhood in relation to the dignity of nature. We must be careful how we proceed here, for I do not only intend a type of environmental stewardship that one may have with the land but also a deepening of both through mutual reciprocal care. When I care for the Land, I find that the Land cares for me.

Here is an example to emphasize this point. I share with my wife the duty of caring for a child. This care involves feeding, playing, reading, sitting quietly, and changing diapers. Each act deepens and changes me. These little actions are obligatory of our relationship. But, I do not do them out of obligation only. I do these out of love. Indeed, I would be a *bad* father if I *only* cared for my daughter because I had a duty to do so. Each of these seemingly trivial activities, done from the attitude of "I-You," deepen the dialogical relationship between my daughter and myself.

To care for another is not to claim dominion over them, as is an I-It approach. Rather, in service to another one finds and explores one's own moral worth. I find, to my great surprise, that changing my daughter's many diapers results in a greater love for her than I would otherwise have. Similarly, I wade through a river removing trash from its waters and banks and I find my relation with the river deepening. The value

of my daughter and the value of the river do not come only from me but the total and open relation I have with them. Part of the experience of these encounters is that they are valuable apart from me. This realization makes them even more valuable and my relationship to them more precious. They are valuable to me. They are valuable in-themselves and they are valuable to other creatures and systems with which we share the world.

An important aspect of the human-nature bond is embracing the development of personhood through reciprocal relationships. Through the reciprocity of the "I-You," to harm another person is to harm oneself. If we hold to a reciprocal moral relationship with nature then this insight carries over. As Eric Katz argues, "a policy of domination subverts both nature and human existence; it denies both the cultural realization of individual good, human and nonhuman."[22] But, by taking the attitude of the "I-You" to nature this connection can also be a source of positive value. If degradation of the en-vironment is degradation of the self, then care for the environment is also care for the self. Through this positive reciprocity with nature, I find new dimensions in my rela-tions with others. I find new ways to love and care for the world. This is what it means to enter into an "I-Thou" relationship with the nonhuman environment. In speaking "You" to nature there is an expansion of the community and, as such, an expansion of the affections, values, and possible activities available to the person.

V

This personalist approach to environmental philosophy is not simply a nice ideal but also has practical import. One of the goals of environmental philosophy is to find ways of explaining the human-nature relationship in a way that does justice to the fullness of that experience and encourages the development of actions and policies that help to preserve and restore damaged ecosystems. Approaching the human-nature relation-ship from the personal attitude of the "I-You" helps us to explain how specific actions have benefits for both the nonhuman natural world and at the same time sustain our relationship with nature. As Andrew Light succinctly puts it:

> This kind of relationship is a necessary condition for encouraging people to protect natural systems and landscapes around them rather than trade them for short-term monetary gains from development. If I am in a normative re-lationship with the land around me, I am less likely to allow it to be harmed further."[23]

We protect those we love not just out of a sense of duty but *because* of our relationship with them.

One simple but illustrative example of building this form of relationship was dem-onstrated to me at Manchester University, where I once taught. Every September, stu-dents and faculty gather with members of the community for the annual Eel River Cleanup.[24] Participants in the cleanup wade downstream with canoes, gathering refuse from bottom and banks of the river. For years the river was a dumping ground for the residents around the Middle Eel River watershed so it is not unusual to find parts of

bicycles, washing machines, car-parts, and other debris. While there are many eco-logical benefits to this cleanup and many reasons participating in the cleanup is the right thing to do, what this approach suggests is that one of the greatest benefits of the cleanup is the creation of positive substantive value in the relationship between the participants of the cleanup and the watershed. The river is cleaner and the fish and the eels are returning. But, the most important change, the change that will protect the river in years to come, is the reciprocal relationship that has been established between the community and the river. It is a positive personal relationship that maintains the dignity of all persons involved while expanding and connecting the community. It meets Leopold's demand that the land be treated with the respect it deserves and goes farther by rekindling the community's relationship with the river and the land as a whole. Buber declares "relation is reciprocity." He continues: "Our students teach us, our works form us…How we are educated by children, by animals!"[25] To this I think we can safely add "the Land!"

Notes

1. Frederick Fere, "Personalism and the Dignity of Nature" in *The Personalist Forum* 2.1 (1986): 1-28; and. John H. Lavely "Personalism supports the Dignity of Nature" in *The Personalist Forum* 2.,1 (1986): 29-37.

2. John Howie, "Can Personalism Provide a Theoretical Basis for an Environmental Philosophy?" *The Personalist Forum* 7.2 (1991): 36.

3. Ibid., 35-36.

4. Howie puts it succinctly, "An ethic based on anthropocentric use readily degenerates into abuse. Hasn't recent history illustrated this?" 36.

5. Following Walter Kaufmann's translation, I use "I-You" instead of "I-Thou" to better capture Buber's intentions.

6. Ferre, 5.

7. Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, Inc., 1993), 35-36.

8. Rufus Burrow, *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 254

9. Joseph Selling, "Is a Personalist Ethic Necessarily Anthropocentric?" in *Ethical Perspectives* 6 (1999): 60-66.

10. Selling, 61. While there are many different forms of personalism this general notion seems to hold true across most philosophies that hold "personality" or "personhood" as the keystone to understanding.

11. Aldo Leopold, *The Land Ethic* in *Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There: Special Commemorative Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 224-225.

12. Ibid, 204

13. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1996), 53.

14. Ibid. This difference between the two I's is crucial for understanding how taking the attitude of the "I-You" can help to expand upon a dimension of our personality with regard to nonhuman nature.

15. Ibid, 54.

16. Ibid, 55. Boundaries always have a limit; that which has a limit can be grasped as an "It."

17. Ibid, 58.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Bryan G. Nortaon, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism" in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 163 – 174.

21. The person is cut off from a dimension of their own personhood. In doing so, the person is lessened; the full integrity of personhood is denied.

22. Eric Katz, "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature" in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 396.

23. Andrew Light, "Ecological Restoration and the Culture of Nature" in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 407.

24. The river also goes by Kenopocomoco, its Native American name.

25. Buber, *I and Thou*, 67.