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Embracing compassion for a more practical moral framework for human-nature relationships

by

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Abstract

Environmental ethics has devoted a lot of attention into fighting anthropocentrism, as well as criticizing the widespread modern view on nature based on a human-nature dualism. In this thesis, I will look into two, opposite environmental ethics frameworks in light of this dualism: extensionism and eco-phenomenology. I will argue that we are in need of a new paradigm for human-nature relationships based on the role of compassion.

In chapter 1, I will look into three extensionist theories — sentientism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism — and argue that they show forms of dualism and rely too much on rational moral commitments in our relationship with nature, while also placing a faulty focus on rejecting anthropocentrism. I will then, in chapter 2, look into a phenomenological critique on extensionism, centred around human emotions and embeddedness, focusing on the emotive response of compassion in our lived experiences with nature. I will argue that this account helps to solve human-nature dualism, as well as rightfully places a focus on anthropocentrism. Finally, in chapter 3, I will take into account the convincing aspects of the theoretical analyses of the first two chapters and defend a more practical framework that rests on the institutional work of expressing compassionate attitudes towards nature and helping individuals and collectives form an understanding of their place in the natural world.

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Introduction

With the rise of an ecological consciousness during the 20th century, an ethics centred around the attempt to assign non-human individual beings with non-instrumental value came along, partly as a reaction against the traditional ethical frameworks in modern philosophy.[1] These frameworks were reflective, particularly in Cartesian philosophy, of a metaphysical worldview that, according to their critics, understood nature as a set of dead and inert organic matter, contrasting with human consciousness.[2] This fundamental opposition between human mind and matter resulted, thus, in a human-nature dualism that helped to justify its exploitation.

Environmental ethics, however, has devoted a lot of attention into criticizing this view of nature and fighting anthropocentrism. Different ethical theories have managed to pose a wide variety of questions and suggested varied conclusions as to how our relationship with nature ought to be. And although this might be a non-ending debate, it is still a very relevant one, as the effects of the climate crisis become increasingly obvious.

Ethical debates around climate change entail, ultimately, discussions about how our moral relationship with the environment ought to be — e.g. deciding on the urgency of protecting endangered species requires an understanding of our position as moral agents towards that same species. In this sense, questions around our moral relationship with nature are *prior* to any discussion on the ethical implications of climate change. This is, therefore, a debate still in urgent need of concrete answers. In light of this, I will focus throughout this thesis on different moral frameworks for the relationship between humans and nature and argue that we are in need of a new paradigm, both at the individual and collective level, based on the notion of compassion — an emotive response that, as I shall explain, can truly help us eliminate the persistent legacy of ontological separation between humans and non-humans that lies at the basis of environmental degradation, as well as it offers a more concrete guidance for this moral relationship. This thesis consists, thus, on theoretical analyses in chapters 1 and 2 with the transversal theme of human-

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[1] Freya Mathews, "The Dilemma of Dualism," in *Routledge International Handbook on Gender and Environment*, ed. Sherilyn MacGregor (New York: Routledge, 2019), 54-70.
[2] Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1991), 1-30.

nature dualism. Chapter 3, in turn, offers a more practical and political account for human-nature relationships.

In chapter 1, I will start by briefly presenting ethical extensionism — a framework that is widely embraced with the rise of an ecological consciousness, mainly since the 1970s. Peter Singer's sentientism,[3] Paul Taylor's biocentrism,[4] and J. Baird Callicott's ecocentrism[5] will be analysed as three different theories of extensionism. I will argue that these accounts still maintain a form of human-nature dualism by relying too much on rationality and by rejecting an emotional component from their moral frameworks. Moreover, I shall argue that these theories, as opposed to their promises, do not really challenge anthropocentrism and, more importantly, their anti-anthropocentric rhetoric is dismissive of humans' experiences of and feelings about nature, which lie at the basis for a moral relationship in the most practical sense — the details of which I will be discussing in chapter 3.

In chapter 2, I will present an eco-phenomenological approach as a response to the problems pointed out about ethical extensionism in chapter 1. I will mainly focus on Charles Brown's phenomenology[6] and Ralph Acampora's notion of 'corporal compassion'.[7] These approaches tell us that the way people put into practice their own ecology is highly dependent on the way everyone thinks about themselves in relation to the natural environment and the way they, consequently, experience this very same environment in their own existence. I will argue that, although these phenomenological approaches draw attention to humans' first-person experiences with nature, rather than existing beliefs or values, as opposed to extensionism, they also run the risk of remaining in the abstract field of intellectual and purely rational construal, without providing moral agents with concrete guidance for their relationship with the natural surroundings. I will, nonetheless, defend the notion of compassion for its inherently practical component, which will serve as a basis for my argumentation in chapter 3.

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[3] Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[4] Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[5] J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 1-157.

[6] Charles Brown, "The Who of Environmental Ethics: Phenomenology and the Moral Self," in *Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment. The Experience of Nature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch and Castrillón Fernando (New York: Springer, 2014), 143-58.

[7] Ralph Acampora, *Corporal Compassion: Animal Ethics and Philosophy of the Body* (Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

Finally, in the last chapter, I will defend an in-between position that takes into account the relevant aspects of the theoretical analyses of chapter 1 and 2, while offering a more practical guidance to our moral relationship with nature. This position will revolve around the role of compassion and structures of feeling, offered by eco-phenomenology, as well as recognize the importance of rationality and systems based on moral rules, offered by extensionism. To do so, I will elaborate on Christian Schemmel's relational egalitarian account[8] and draw a comparison with the institutional role in expressing compassionate attitudes towards nature. I will argue that this account provides a compelling framework to help individuals and communities build a public understanding of their experiences in nature and hence develop the emotive response of compassion towards it. The notion of 'compassion' will convey the meaning of a *"sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it"*[9] and will aim at constituting a framework that better allows people to feel the desire to treat nature with acts of care in a more practical sense.

My overall aim is, therefore, to develop a practical and political account for humans' moral relationship with the environment that also works on a theoretical level. The term 'nature', I should add, will convey different meanings throughout this thesis, each one of them explained when addressing the different theories.

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[8] Christian Schemmel, "Distributive and Relational Equality," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 11, no. 2 (2012): 123–48.

[9] Merriam-Webster, s.v. "compassion", accessed May 29, 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compassion.

Chapter 1: An extensionist framework

In this first chapter, I will provide an overview of three different ways of criticising the idea that humans and non-humans are completely distinct on a moral level. I will start by briefly presenting ethical extensionism, which stems from the rise of an ecological consciousness during the 20th century. To do so, I give use to the first chapter of *The Ecological Self* by Freya Mathews,[10] as a stepping stone to my overview of three forms of extensionism: Peter Singer's sentientism[11] in section 1.2, Taylor's biocentrism[12] in section 1.3, and J. Baird Callicott's ecocentrism[13] in section 1.4, each one followed by a critical analysis. I will argue that these theories still maintain a form of human-nature dualism by relying too heavily on rationality and by rejecting an emotional component from their moral frameworks, which lies at the core of human-made ecological degradation.

Finally, in section 1.5, I will argue that these environmental ethics theories not only do not really challenge anthropocentrism, as opposed to their promises, but the fact that they focus on an anti-anthropocentric rhetoric is dismissive of humans' experiences and feelings about nature, which, as it will be further argued in chapter 2 and 3, lie at the basis of moral relationships in the most practical sense.

1.1 - Ethical extensionism

In order to understand ethical extensionism, we first have to briefly explore that to which it reacts. In very general terms, according to Freya Mathews' analysis, the modern scientific consciousness, one that understood nature in terms of mechanistic laws of measurement and mathematics, and which reinforced the conviction of all phenomena as explicable, measurable, and predictable, radically shaped Western philosophical thought.[14] Particularly in Descartes'

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[10] Mathews, *The Ecological Self*, 1-30.
[11] Singer, *Practical Ethics*.
[12] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*.
[13] Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 1-157.
[14] Mathews, *The Ecological Self*, 7.

philosophy, Mathews argues, a particular view on the notion of matter is reinforced — seen as something irrevocably dead, it was marked by its absence of consciousness.[15] Matter was mainly seen as something that was utterly unlike ourselves as humans, for it was essentially *"antithetical to spirit"*[16] — that is, the human mind. This categorical division between self and matter, Mathews goes on, meant a drastic divorce between the human individual and nature: the self is separated from all other elements and hence from nature; the latter is fundamentally the non-self, the other which ought not to be associated with the self. As Mathews writes, *"[t]his draining-off of spirit from matter was naturally expressed in mind-matter dualism: the human mind had to become the repository of spirit since Nature had become the arena of blind matter in motion".*[17]

The mind-matter dualism is, Mathews herewith suggests, also a human-nature dualism; this, the author explains, has defined nature as a machine composed of living things seen as arbitrary and meaningless, and thereby devoid of any moral value. The exploitation of nature is, thus, validated under the belief that any idea of mutual flourishing between humans and non-humans would be dismissive of the superiority of the human mind, perpetuating a sphere of moral concern that excludes non-human living beings.[18]

Val Plumwood, who extensively wrote about the logic of dualism, argues in her 1993 book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* that such an ontological separation is not a simple dichotomy, but a dualism with profound ethical implications for our relationship with nature.[19] It is more than any hierarchical relationship, and indeed a separation that denies any continuity. A dualistic construal between humans and nature, she explains, does not create differences between humans and nature where none exist; it does, instead, create a conceptual framework based on hierarchies and oppositions around said similarities and differences.[20] It leads, thus, to phenomena such as human chauvinism, or speciesism, which were seen as rational and thereby valid.[21] This will be further addressed in the last section of this chapter.

A promising ecological consciousness during the 20th century, however, began to strongly criticize this view on nature — one which is, of course, quite broad, not at all shared by all modern

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[15] Ibid, 7-8.
[16] Ibid, 19.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid, 23.
[19] Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 47.
[20] Ibid, 47-48.
[21] Mathews, *The Ecological Self*, 19-20.

philosophers, and meant simply as a brief introduction to the ethical frameworks presented below in this chapter. Nonetheless, it exerted a great influence in Western thought.[22] Environmental ethics, dedicated to dismantling this worldview, had as an early signature the foundation of a distinctive field of ethics, which involved, for the most part, a rejection of anthropocentrism.[23] This meant refusing to identify moral obligations and duties merely amongst and between humans, as well as rejecting the ethical prioritization of human interests. In this sense, many environmental ethics theories, disenchanted with the Cartesian attitude towards nature, ferociously criticized frameworks based on anthropocentrism.

This new ethical approach to the natural environment arrived in the hope of extending the scope of ethical theories to encompass those typically left outside the reach of any moral concern: ethical extensionism.[24] The extensionist view argues that moral consideration should be extended beyond humans to other individuals or entities. It has claimed that traditional moral theories of Western philosophy entailed the inherent contradiction of excluding non-human beings which arguably could meet relevant criteria for moral status or were in possession of some objective intrinsic value,[25] among which are Singer's sentientism, to which I turn below. Expanding the sphere of morally considerable individuals or entities was, thus, required, in an effort to criticize the idea that humans and non-humans are completely distinct on a moral level.

1.2 - Singer's sentientism

1.2.1 - Overview

Peter Singer, known for his theory of animal liberation,[26] provided a positive pathway to animal ethics debates. In his 1975 book called *Animal Liberation*, he argues that there is no morally

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[22] Ibid, 11-12.

[23] Light, "Contemporary Environmental Ethics," 428.

[24] Mylan Jr. Engel, "Ethical Extensionism," in *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Detroit, MI: Gale Cengage Learning, 2008), 396.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York City: HarperCollins, 1975).

significant aspect in humans that would justify treating them in a radically different way from the way we treat sentient non-human animals.[27] Species membership is not a morally relevant criterion, he argues, hence discriminating against any sentient animal is just as immoral as discriminating on account of race.[28] His extensionist approach to animals is one in which non-human beings are granted moral status insofar as we can see that they are in possession of sentience — defined by him as the ability to feel pain and pleasure[29]. He thus seeks to dismantle speciesism, or the *"prejudice or attitude of bias in favour of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species."*[30] Favouring one's interests, he adds, is only speciesist if considered *"on the basis of species itself."*[31]

There have been a number of different accounts of sentience as a criterion for moral status. Not all of them defend sentience as the only valid criterion; Singer, however, represents the endorsement of what Mary Anne Warren calls the *"sentience only view",*[32] claiming sentience *"is (1) a necessary condition for having any moral status at all; and (2) a sufficient condition for having full and equal moral status."*[33] His sentiocentrism describes the theory that sentient animals, both humans and non-humans, should be the centre of ethical consideration.

According to Singer, our moral calculations stem from the principle of equal consideration of interests, which requires equally including and weighing all affected interests in the process of moral decision-making.[34] Equally considering interests, furthermore, has to do only with comparable interests, which are applied exclusively to sentient beings (since, according to Singer, these are the only entities that have interests and thereby the only entities in possession of moral status). In this sense, favouring one's interest on the account of one's species is, Singer argues, failing to act in accordance with this principle. Equal consideration of interests, I should add, *"is a minimal principle of equality in the sense that it does not dictate equal treatment",*[35] according to Singer; in other words, this principle is not driven necessarily by treating everyone equally at

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[27] Ibid, 53-54.

[28] Ibid, 350.

[29] Ibid, 38.

[30] Ibid, 35.

[31] Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 53.

[32] Mary Anne Warren, *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things*. Issues in Biomedical Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1-36.

[33] Ibid, 2.

[34] Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 20.

[35] Ibid, 22.

all times, as sometimes it is more wise, according to him, to allocate one's limited resources to those more in need.[36] However, the principle of equal consideration of interests does imply weighing interests impartially, not depending upon the species of a particular being.[37]

In Singer's theory, sentience is picked as the criterion for moral consideration in light of a utilitarian approach. As this is a consequentialist moral theory, it discerns actions between morally right and wrong depending on their consequences; these consequences have to do with the notion of utility, which is defined by classical utilitarians as happiness (i.e. pleasure and/or the absence of pain). Thus, our actions should maximize utility.[38] Preference utilitarianism, however, a contemporary development from classical utilitarianism advocated by Singer, defines happiness as the mere satisfaction of preferences, which rejects an impersonal assessment of happiness and allows for the wellbeing of individuals to be *"determined by their own values".*[39] This variant also permits the inclusion of animals' pain and pleasure in our moral deliberations. In this sense, as Warren explains, Singer defends that it is simply arbitrary to exclude the utility of sentient beings, which are perfectly capable of feeling pain and pleasure, and therefore are able to wish for the satisfaction of their preferences.[40]

Much linked to Singer's utilitarianism is his intentional detachment from emotions. In his 1981 book *The Expanding Circle*,[41] he starts by elaborating on the connection between morality and our biological ability for altruism. He then moves on to demonstrate that our capacity to reason is what permits moral progress, arguing that it leads us to recognize the principle that *"one's own interests are one among many sets of interests, no more important than the similar interests of others."*[42] Human capacity for reason makes altruism take place beyond our familiar, social, and cultural circles, hence helping us expand the circle.[43]

This idea of altruism, rather disassociated from an emotional basis, is further developed in *The Most Good You Can Do*, in which the author offers a perspective on ethical living based on

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[36] Ibid, 23.

[37] Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 50.

[38] Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Elements of Philosophy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013),111-41.

[39] Warren, *Moral Status,* 12.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

[42] Ibid, 106.

[43] Ibid, 125-47.

effective altruism.[44] This altruism facilitates, he argues, living less selfishly, for it allows reason, not emotions, to dictate what is that we should do in an effort to do the most good.[45] Effective altruism is, thus, not only a philosophical movement but also a social movement, according to Singer, one which stresses the importance of evidence, and reasoning based on said evidence, in figuring out what are the most effective ways to promote good in the world.[46] This radically unsentimental appeal for our actions calls out what Singer considers to be a flawed emotional empathy. Let us see further.

This emotional empathy entails an *"empathic concern"* for other people or living beings, which tends to lead to feelings of, for instance, compassion, and *"personal distress"* upon others' emotions or situations.[47] Although, as Singer claims, effective altruists are indeed *"sufficiently concerned about the welfare of others to make meaningful changes in their lives",*[48] they are *not* driven by emotional empathy. They are, rather, sensitive to statistical evidence, percentages, and cost analysis. The way they act and seek to promote the most good has simply to do with working out the highest cost-effective way to do so. This numerical evidence becomes morally significant through reason, not any emotional concern. In fact, according to the author, too much emotional-based decision making can lead us to favour individual cases rather unfairly, instead of making use of our resources in a strategic and efficient way to promote the best outcome: although empathy does make us position ourselves in the shoes of others, this is ineffective for the maximization of utility, he argues, and it runs the risk of being detrimental.[49] Our moral calculations, in this sense, and in light of this utilitarian approach, should be disassociated from emotions. Reason and logical argumentation should, thus, be our most fundamental moral guides.

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[44] Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*. The Castle Lectures in Ethics, Politics, and Economics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
[45] Ibid, 14-6.
[46] Ibid, 14.
[47] Ibid, 67.
[48] Ibid, 65.
[49] Ibid, 67.

1.2.2 - Critical analysis

As critics such as Plumwood explain, since sentience is a criterion widely common amongst humans, Singer's grounds for moral status are dependent on the recognition of this key similarity between human and non-human animals.[50] This process of assigning moral status is, thus, one of an *extension*, for it departs from us as humans and extends to other beings as extensions of ourselves.[51] What matters for moral consideration is this similarity, according to Singer. In this sense, as Christian Diehm also argues in his analysis of Plumwood's critique of extensionism, the process of opening up the scope of moral consideration through an extensionist strategy happens insofar as we can extend an essential property recognized in ourselves as humans to non-human entities.[52]

Beings now allowed in the sphere of moral status, or in the sphere of any moral consideration, are rescued by an exercise of assimilation.[53] Singer's ethical extension is an assimilation process, which, as Diehm's analysis tells us, is *"less about expanding our ethical sensibilities than about assimilating some other-than-human beings to an already existing, highly restrictive model of agency and respect."*[54] This results, I argue, in a discontinuity between us and the non-human world, which is compatible with the above-discussed Cartesian dualism. Let us look closer into this.

Diehm's analysis of Plumwood's argumentation against ethical extensionism explains that this strategy perpetuates the idea that ethical relationships with nature are to be based on the conception of such environment as the *"other-than-human nature"*,[55] both because this type of criteria will always be more easily met by humans and because it positions humans as ontologically, and therefore ethically, separated from nature — understood by Singer has the set of living entities *other than* humans.

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[50] Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 115.
[51] Ibid, 143.
[52] Christian Diehm, "Minding Nature: Val Plumwood's Critique of Moral Extensionism," *Environmental Ethics* 32, no. 1 (2010): 6-8.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid, 7.
[55] Ibid.

Singer's assimilation strategy, thus, perpetuates a logic of exclusion, whereby the other is seen as a non-self who is only somehow morally comparable with, or at least closer to, humans when it reflects the self-image of humans.[56] The non-self is rescued by an assimilation process that takes place in a sphere of what Plumwood coins 'relational definition', whereby the *other* (i.e. the non-human living being) is defined and identified in a necessary relation to the *self* (i.e. the human being).[57] Within the extensionist paradigm, to identify an essential property in non-human beings as somehow similar to that of humans is to define the other in relation to what humans regard as valuable for themselves, and thereby deny differences and diversity, Plumwood claims.[58] This extensionism, she notes, does not offer any particular challenge to the dualistic relationship with nature inherited from Descartes,[59] which is even characterised as a form of neo-Cartesianism.[60]

As I will further argue later in this chapter, this relational definition, which is at the core of human-nature dualism, is problematic not because it is anthropocentric per se, but because it is shaped in a sphere of intellectual construction that picks and prioritizes certain fixed and final features or properties, which dictate how moral agents should relate to and engage with non-human beings; this dualism does not allow much room for understanding how and to what extent humans can actually care for nature (I will turn to this at the end of this chapter and in the following chapters). According to Plumwood, the process of assimilation happens insofar as there is a self and an other who are ontologically, sharply separated and forcibly assimilated through an appeal to a certain property, status, or value.[61] The problem, thus, I argue, is not so much that only sentient beings are ascribed full moral status, but the fact that the nature of the framework itself is based on a process of assimilation that perpetuates separation.

Linked to this logic of assimilation is Singer's fixation on reason and argumentation, which, I argue, is again linked to the Cartesian dualism and the insistence on a drastic separation between humans and other beings. Here, emotion works, once again, as an antidote to the human mind, seen as utterly *"unreliable, untrustworthy and morally irrelevant"*.[62] Edward O. Wilson offers interesting arguments in favour of humans in possession of an innate and biological

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[56] Plumwood, *Feminism*, 137.
[57] Ibid, 52.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Diehm, "Minding Nature", 3-8.
[60] Ibid, 6.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid, 168.

emotional connection to other living beings — or, in his words, a 'biophilia hypothesis'.[63] This notion of biophilia does not represent one single emotion or instinct, but rather a set of intertwined and complex learning rules that shape our feelings and our emotional spectrum[64]. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully explore the origins of this so-called biophilia, I believe this shows an interesting opposition to Singer's case for reasoning. Under this view, our brain belongs to a biocentric environment and it is based on emotional responses: it has not evolved in a "*machine-regulated world*";[65] the human mind, and human capacity to reason cannot be disassociated from emotions. I will come back to this 'biophilia hypothesis' in chapter 2, but for now it lays here as a reminder of how Singer reinforces a dualistic construal that dissociates self from emotions, as he rejects the emotional basis of humans' actions, which results, as it will become clearer throughout this thesis, in a separation between humans and other beings, ecological processes, and nature as a whole.

Singer's assimilation strategy is, thereby, a rationalist strategy against an emotional appeal in and within moral deliberation and action; the exercise of assimilation is in its core a detachment from emotions. This need not be, Singer would claim, morally problematic, as he is simply concerned with the attribution of full moral status. However, as I shall argue further at the end of this chapter, the flaw lies on the very foundation of the moral framework: a human-nature dualism is perpetuated through the predominance of the human mind and rational moral deliberation as something completely dissociated from any actual engagement with nature in deciding how we ought to act. This theoretical flaw, which concerns the perpetuation of human-nature dualism, is, thus, closely connected to the theory's applicability, for it impairs the moral agent's engagement with the object of moral concern.

In the next section, I will look into the biocentric response to sentientism as another attempt to criticize the idea that humans and non-humans are fundamentally distinct on a moral level.

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[63] Edward O. Wilson, "Biophilia and the Conservation Ethic," in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, ed. Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O Wilson (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2013), 31-41.
[64] Ibid, 31.
[65] Ibid, 32.

1.3 - Taylor's biocentrism

  1.3.1 - Overview

Biocentrism proponents have compellingly pushed the boundaries of environmental ethics beyond sentientism.[66] Although understood as a form of extensionism, for it calls for a large expansion of direct moral consideration, biocentrism has been seen as a step further from sentientism, as it not only recognizes sentient beings as deserving of equal moral consideration but also all individual life forms[67].

Paul Taylor, known for his 1986 book *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*,[68] develops a biocentric outlook, entailing moral duties towards all living beings independent of the moral duties we owe to fellow human beings. Also importantly, just like Singer, he does not assign any moral status to holistic entities: the ontological status of an ecosystem is reducible to the status of its individual members; as a result, there should not be direct moral standing assigned to holistic entities such as ecosystems or entire species. This makes his perspective individualist in nature.

Developing a deontological approach — one that does not, as opposed to Singer's utilitarianism, seek to maximize happiness or the satisfaction of preferences — , Taylor claims that all beings should receive equal treatment as long as there is not any morally significant criterion that differentiates living organisms. He rejects the criterion of sentience as relevant for moral status, as it is, in his view, simply considered more valuable from an anthropocentric perspective.[69] Any normative framework, if relying on criteria for moral status such as sentience, biocentrists argue, will obviously leave all plant kingdom out of moral consideration[70] (Singer, however, would not see this as a problem, since he does not seek to provide plants with moral status). In Taylor's perspective, we are obliged to treat other living beings, not only non-human animals but also

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[66] Light, "Contemporary Environmental Ethics", 427.

[67] Chan Kai, "Ethical Extensionism under Uncertainty of Sentience: Duties to Non-Human Organisms without Drawing a Line," *Environmental Values* 20, no. 3 (2011): 324.

[68] Taylor, *Respect for Nature,* 59-86.

[69] Robin Attfield, "Biocentrism," in *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, vol. 1, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 3.

[70] Ibid, 2.

plants,[71] as ends in themselves. Biocentrism argues that multiplicity and diversity of life forms other than humans and sentient non-human animals are ignored and denied moral consideration, in Singer's theory, for the sake of prioritizing a certain property that *some* happen to possess. Taylor transforms his is-statements into ought-statements by extending an objective intrinsic value from humans to non-human beings.[72] He then goes on to explain why all humans and non-human beings are equally deserving of moral consideration.

This objective intrinsic value is referred to as 'inherent worth'.[73] Taylor firstly explains the concept of 'a good of a being' in order to then go back to inherent worth. The author regards all living beings, both animals and plants, regardless of their level of human sameness, as having a good of their own, without reference to any other thing or being, for this good is not reducible to others' own goods.[74] Non-human beings, especially those with no capacity to internally find representations of certain aspects or scenarios of the external world in order to figure out what might or might not be beneficial to them — something which is a very common strategy amongst humans — might rely on chemical signalling or other forms of internal production of alerts. This notion refers only to what proves to be objectively good for the living being, not what said living being is capable of consciously and subjectively value and desire.[75]

The concept of a being's own good calls, according to Taylor, for the concept of inherent worth, for if there is an objective good that concerns the maintenance and flourishing of one's life as a biological, individual entity, then this means moral agents "*ought or ought not to treat it in a certain way.*"[76] The exact reason a moral agent ought to refrain from harming a good of a being is because all beings are possessors of inherent worth. This way, the notion presupposes *"(1) that the entity is deserving of moral concern and consideration* [...]*, and (2) that all moral agents have a prima facie duty to promote or preserve the entity's good as an end in itself and for the sake of the entity whose good it is."*[77]

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[71] Taylor refrains from touching upon domestic animals, focusing only on wild organisms.

[72] Aryne Lynne Sheppard, "Two Rationalist-Deontological Approaches in Environmental Ethics: A Critical Comparison of Rolston and Taylor," (PhD diss. University of Guelph, 2001), 58.

[73] Taylor, *Respect for Nature,* 71-80.

[74] Ibid, 67.

[75] Ibid, 63.

[76] Ibid, 72.

[77] Ibid, 75.

In light of the previous attempt to challenge anthropocentrism, Taylor does seem to go very much beyond an anthropocentric perspective, claiming that inherent worth is recognized in an entity in virtue of being a member of the biotic community of a natural ecosystem and not in virtue of being similar to humans. The very term 'inherent' implies an independence from being valued by humans or not.

According to Taylor, each living being is a unified system that seeks to preserve its own existence through the promotion and protection of its well-being; individuals are, thus, teleological centres of life.[78] He confers nature — nature as the biotic community composed of living individuals, both human and non-human — a sense of aiming, of having intentions and goals. By attributing telos to each living being, though, the author challenges the anthropomorphic animism typical of extensionist theories. Instead of appealing to an effort of assimilation — as this notion not only does not presuppose criteria such as sentience but it indeed entails notions which are undoubtedly not human-derived nor particularly more common amongst humans than in other non-human beings —, he draws attention to growth, flourishing, and self-maintaining properties, which are all recognized in humans, non-human animals, and plants alike.

1.3.2 - Critical Analysis

All beings, as teleological centres of life, stand in the biotic community equally in the possession of a good of their own, and hence equally possessing inherent worth. In this sense, I should note, the legacy of a radical Cartesian anthropocentrism *seems* to be challenged by Taylor's theory, both by arguing that a being's own good is independent of our good as humans and by rejecting the attribution of moral consideration on the basis of some humanlike essential property. And yet, as briefly mentioned in section 1.2, anthropocentrism per se is not necessarily the problem in our moral framework to approach nature (again, I will reflect further on this in section 1.5 of this chapter). Rather, the problem lies in the distance and separation created by the dualistic framework, which is an impediment for the establishment of a more sustainable moral relationship with nature. Let us look closer into this.

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[78] Ibid, 122.

The idea that every being has a good of its own, which ultimately confers said being with inherent worth, is, I want to argue, a non-negotiable moral assumption — an objective, metaphysical absolute, which postulates that moral agents ought to recognize every beings' own goods. In fact, this idea assumes that moral agents will simply, through reason, recognize nature as value-laden. As seen above, Taylor's notion of a being's own good does not fall into the same process of assimilation as in Singer's account. However, it is not so obvious that this has proven to be sufficient to effectively offer a practical and concrete moral framework for our relationship with nature. How can we actually make ourselves care for the good of all living beings?

Although ethical concepts such as 'inherent worth' are secured in the sense that they provide final, concrete moral solutions within a theoretical framework — as opposed to sentience, upon which in many cases there is uncertainty[79] —, they seem to dictate, rather than help, moral agents going through their experiences in nature in order to actively care for it. I will elaborate further on this in chapter 2 and 3.

Taylor does build his theory around the idea of an ultimate attitude of respect for nature, claiming that *"actions are right and character traits are morally good in virtue of their expressing or embodying a certain ultimate moral attitude, which I call respect for nature."*[80] However, his appeal for this attitude is done through an intentional rationalist approach, whereby the affective dimension of this attitude is preceded by a valuational dimension. Let us see: the affective dimension is defined as the *"disposition to have certain feelings in response to certain events in the world"*,[81] whereas the valuational dimension is described as the *"disposition to regard all wild living things* [...] *as possessing inherent worth."*[82] Thus, the disposition to feel pleased or displeased upon occurrences in nature happens only insofar as we recognize inherent worth in other beings.[83] Emotions are, according to him, preceded by a rational recognition of objective value.

We face, again, a strong case of favouring, above everything, our capacity to reason in order to recognize all beings as equally morally relevant. In this sense, although there is no direct effort of assimilation, we still face a dualistic separation between the self — the possessor of

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[79] Kai, "Ethical Extensionism" 323–46.
[80] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 80.
[81] Ibid, 83.
[82] Ibid, 81.
[83] Ibid, 83-84.

rationality who creates the moral norm — and nature — the object of moral concern. This separation lies at the basis of a rejection of any emotional component and any account of actual experiences of moral agents with objects of moral concern: by focusing on separation, we downplay the importance of individual experiences in nature and what those experiences tell us about the way we feel compelled to act towards nature. As Plumwood has also argued with regards to this, *"reason and emotion so understood form a dualism, part of the interwoven set which protects and strengthens human/nature dualism. Thus reason and emotion are construed in terms of radical exclusion as sharply polarised and oppositional."*[84]

Questions about how moral agents relate to and care about nature are, according to Taylor, questions that solely concern the norms by which we rationally bind ourselves[85]. As a matter of fact, very opposed to what Edward O. Wilson would claim, he states that *"understanding ourselves as biological entities* [...] *does not provide us with any particular directives as to how we should conduct our lives."*[86] Again, his descriptive argumentation is followed by a normative argumentation through an appeal to, above everything else, our human capacity for reasoning. I will come back to this in the last section of this chapter.

Before moving on to a more extended elaboration on the importance of emotions and experiences in nature in order to actively care for it, I will firstly present the ecocentric response to biocentrism, as a third attempt to criticize the idea that humans and non-humans are fundamentally distinct on a moral level.

1.4 - Callicott's ecocentrism

1.4.1 - Overview

Very much in contrast with biocentrism, instead of ascribing intrinsic value exclusively to individual organisms (or at least deriving the value of ecological wholes from the good or

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[84] Plumwood, *Feminism*, 168.
[85] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 48.
[86] Ibid, 49.

wellbeing of individual living beings), ecocentrists often ascribe this value to ecological wholes, such as animal and plant species, ecosystems, and habitats.[87] This means that they define the concept of 'nature' as inherently holistic, which conveys the entirety of the physical world and that which obeys physical laws, including human and non-human animals, biotic and abiotic elements.

Ecocentrism is again another extensionist effort, for it works to expand ethical consciousness and moral consideration to ecological, holistic entities. However, it is a particularly radical extensionist effort, understood as a step even further from biocentrism, for it claims that the moral status of the individual member of a biological community is derivative of its ecosystem's status and the whole biosphere[88]. Aldo Leopold, known as the father of ecocentric environmental ethics indeed argued that *"[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."*[89]

J. Baird Callicott, highly influenced by Leopold, offers us a more contemporary ecocentric project, arguing against an ethic based on sentience, for humans are dependent upon the biological community, which forces us to ascribe moral consideration to all other members of the community, sentient or not.[90] He rejects a utilitarian account, arguing that it sees non-sentient beings as mere possessors of instrumental value, as a field of utility for the other, sentient beings.[91]

Callicott herewith claims that holistic entities are more than the mere sum of their parts, for *"[t]he various parts of the 'biotic community' (individual animals and plants) depend upon one another economically so that the system as such acquires distinct characteristics of its own."*[92] The good of the biotic community, in this sense, is the *"ultimate measure of the moral value, the rightness or wrongness, of actions"*,[93] which means moral agents have an absolute and direct moral obligation to preserve this good.

This account perceives the human being, previously alienated from nature in a mechanical world, as part of an ecological web whereby interdependence and relation between humans and

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[87] Michael Paul Nelson, "Teaching Holism in Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 32, no. 1 (2010): 36.

[88] Yeuk Sze Lo, "The Land Ethic and Callicott's Ethical System (1980–2001): An Overview and Critique," *Inquiry*, 44 (2001): 334.

[89] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 224–25.

[90] Hugh P. McDonald, *John Dewey and Environmental Philosophy.* Suny Series in Environmental Philosophy and Ethics (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 14.

[91] Ibid, 13.

[92] Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 23.

[93] Ibid, 21.

non-humans, including wholes and abiotic parts of nature, is crucial.[94] In fact, because of this, ecocentrism has to a certain extent challenged the human-nature dualistic worldview inherited from modern philosophy briefly discussed above, for it has broken Western forms of individualism by subordinating the value of individual members to the value of the biotic community.[95] Callicott, just like Leopold, does not even ascribe equal moral worth to individuals, be they human or non-human, for the end goal is always to preserve and promote the good of the biotic community;[96] every being, including human beings, is subordinated to this good. There is, thus, relative moral value to the different individuals that constitute the ecological community depending on whether and to what extent they promote the good of said community.[97] This is fundamentally different from a biocentric outlook, which claims that the good of the community is always reducible to that of its individual members — it is indeed only a *"statistical concept".*[98]

In this sense, there is a strong anti-anthropocentric rhetoric within Callicott's theory. As Hugh McDonald explains in his critical analysis of Callicott's ethical system, this ecocentric framework stresses relations between and amongst ecological wholes, rather than focusing on individuals, hence grounding moral communities in ecology itself, rather than in the human sphere.[99] The dualistic separation between humans and nature does seem to be very blurred under this paradigm of radical interdependence, for the natural environment is seen as a community to which humans belong and with which there is no confrontation in subject-object terms; distinctions between subject and object become almost irrelevant from a normative point of view in this approach.[100] Callicott, rightfully so, draws attention to the importance of transforming value theory, moving it away from the Cartesian metaphysics: he argues, in fact, that such a metaphysical worldview has been the primary cause of ecological devastations, which are themselves a product of the lack of valuation of non-human animals, habitats, ecosystems, etc.[101] I will come back to this later in this chapter.

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[94] McDonald, *John Dewey*, 30.
[95] Ibid, 16.
[96] Lo, "The Land Ethic and Callicott's Ethical System," 331–58.
[97] McDonald, *John Dewey*, 25.
[98] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 69-71.
[99] McDonald, *John Dewey*, 14.
[100] Ibid, 25.
[101] Ibid, 12.

Interestingly, the author also places a focus on the subjective emotions of moral agents in our relationship with the natural environment. The allocation of intrinsic value is, McDonald clarifies, grounded in the feelings of individuals[102] — as opposed to Taylor's account, which stresses the fundamentally cognitive nature of morality, prior to any feelings.[103] Such emotive responses to nature are intentional, and such feelings are possible because they are altruistic, oriented towards the other.[104] At the same time, according to McDonald, the intrinsic value that is recognized by the self — projected by the feelings of the evaluator — has no reference to the self and it is apart from it (and its consciousness): the projection of this value occurs simultaneously with the recognition of the very independent existence of the value.[105] This value, according to Callicott, is *"humanly conferred but not necessarily homocentric".*[106]

1.4.2 - Critical Analysis

Callicott's justification of the objectivity of intrinsic value, however, is, as McDonald points out as well, rather vague. If intrinsic value is independent from humans' feelings while still being projected by subjective feelings, it is lacking a further explanation for the nature of such projection.[107] As McDonald writes, *"[t]here is the further problem of how intrinsic value can be part of the nature of the thing independently of consciousness if it is based on subjective feelings."*[108] Moreover, what are indeed the feelings and emotions that allow the logical judgment of according intrinsic value to take place?[109] And, again asked by McDonald, *"which entities should receive* [intrinsic value] *and why?"*[110]

Again, the idea of objectivity of intrinsic value seems to be reduced to final, fixed rationalist foundations, which are rather detached from the experience of the moral agent in and with nature — which, in some way, is a perpetuation of a separation between self and other. This

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[102] McDonald, *John Dewey*, 20-1.
[103] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 82.
[104] McDonald, *John Dewey*, 22.
[105] Ibid, 20-1.
[106] Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, 1989, 151.
[107] McDonald, *John Dewey*, 21.
[108] Ibid, 20.
[109] Ibid, 21.
[110] Ibid.

framework dictates the recognition of intrinsic value upon the subjects of valuation as an objective feature 'out there', an idea that is indeed very linked, in Callicott's theory, to Plato's source of objective value.[111]

This theory, as it is seen in Taylor's account, by dictating this value upon nature, and expecting humans to recognize it, neglects moral agents' experiences in, and the concrete feelings one has towards, nature. Whether these are inherent worth or intrinsic value, these are abstract properties stemming from intellectual constructions detached from people's actual engagement and relationship with nature. Again, these are forms of human-nature dualism, which perpetuate the idea that somehow our rational, moral decision-making processes can be separated from emotional and physical experiences (what Descartes would call, in much rather radical terms, matter or body, as opposed to spirit or mind) with nature.

I will now, in the next section, argue that neither of the above theories truly challenges anthropocentrism, contrary to their promises, and that the anti-anthropocentric rhetoric is in itself flawed.

1.5 - The aftermath

As shown in the previous sections, sentientism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism can be described as three different standpoints within ethical extensionism. In general terms, these theories sprang as a reaction against the predominant view of human supremacy in modern philosophy, which took form in a radically sharp, Cartesian human-nature dualism.

In Taylor's and Callicott's theories, we have seen an effort to dismantle anthropocentrism as the most important enterprise in the construction of a new paradigm of ethical relationships between humans and non-humans (Singer, in turn, does not mention anthropocentrism very often, focusing more specifically on speciesism). In my view, however, rejecting anthropocentrism is problematic for two main reasons, to which I turn below.

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[111] J. Baird Callicott, "Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory and Environmental Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1984): 299–309.

1.5.1 - Anthropocentrism and human-nature dualism

Firstly, anthropocentrism is mistakenly confused with the radical ontological view that is the Cartesian human-nature dualism. These two are not the same thing, and regarding them as such results in problematic frameworks for our relationship with nature. Let us look closer into this:

As noted before, human-nature dualism carries the idea that humans can and should, in some ways, be separated from the rest of nature, for everything that is matter (e.g. non-human animals, plants, ecological processes, landscapes, etc.) is antithetical to the human mind. This has resulted, as explained above, in a logic of sharp separation between humans and nature, which in turn has made it impossible to include non-human living entities in the sphere of moral concern, and hence resulted in a justification of drastic and continuous exploitation of the natural environment. Regardless of whether human-nature dualism is actually deconstructed by the authors presented in this chapter, the matter of fact is that this is attempted to be solved at the expense of anthropocentrism per se.

Anthropocentrism, I should note, has been criticized by environmental ethicists, in the words of Tim Hayward, due to carrying a *"concern with human interests to the exclusion, or at the expense, of interests of other species."*[112] It has been put under scrutiny by environmentalists, seen as a problematic standpoint that undermines the status of non-human beings and/or nature for moral consideration. In this sense, both Taylor and Callicott have claimed that humans' central position in our moral relationships with nature has to be overcome and that humans do have to be reduced to a peripheral position in order to account for nature's objective intrinsic value, not merely instrumental. However, as Hayward argues, phenomena that result in the arbitrary exclusion of non-human beings' interests is more accurately coined under the term 'speciesism' and 'human chauvinism'.[113] As Hayward explains, and as mentioned above in this chapter, speciesism is defined as the arbitrary discrimination on the account of species,[114] whereas human chauvinism is the arbitrary advocacy for relevant differences in humans that work to favour humans' interests.[115] In this sense, what seems to be a problematic result of the radical dualism between humans and nature — the fact that this establishes a sharp separation between humans

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[112] Tim Hayward, "Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood problem," *Environmental Values* 6, no. 1 (1997): 52.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid, 53.

and the natural environment that confers the latter a merely instrumental value — is attempted to be solved by Taylor and Callicott by the dismantling of anthropocentrism per se. Whereas rejecting nature from a moral sphere is undoubtedly problematic, claiming that the reason for this rejection is anthropocentrism is likewise problematic.

As Hayward points out, anthropocentrism is simply unavoidable in ethical reasoning in the sense that it is what allows ethics to take place. There is an unavoidable *"asymmetry"* between humans and non-humans: human features will inevitably remain the benchmark in moral consideration, as humans simply cannot know, feel, and concretize moral consideration in a meaningful way outside of the boundaries of what is, precisely, human nature.[116] This human-centeredness is a mere — and yet very relevant, as it will become clearer throughout the next chapters — *"non-contingent limitation on moral thinking as such"*, one that it is impossible to *"be overcome even in principle"*.[117] This limitation entailed in our human-centredness need not mean falling into speciesism; destroying entire habitats, hunting species until their very extinction, or burning down forests is simply not the same as happening to be human and building moral systems based on the possibilities of what human nature has to offer.

Apropos, Hayward cites Frederick Ferré who claims humans *"have no choice but to think as humans"*.[118] In this sense, neither of the theories above overcomes anthropocentrism. In fact, they very much reinforce it: the agent of valuation is always, and obviously, necessarily human. The idea that there can ever be a completely non-anthropocentric scheme of values is unfeasible, for the way we select the so-called 'objective' and 'independent' values is in itself shaped by human knowledge, cultures, as well as humans' ethical and metaethical systems[119]. Taylor's and Callicott's anti-anthropocentric efforts make them actually further perpetuate anthropocentrism by, as Hayward would claim, *"projecting certain values, which as a matter of fact are selected by a human, onto nonhuman beings without certain warrant for doing so."*[120]

Secondly, and most importantly, to assign humans an irrevocably peripheral status (as it is done especially in ecocentric views, in which there is a hierarchy of values starting from the biotic

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[116] Ibid, 56-7.

[117] Ibid, 56.

[118] Ferré Frederick, "Personalistic Organicism: Paradox or Paradigm?", in *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, ed. Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72, quoted in Hayward, "Anthropocentrism," 51.

[119] Hayward, "Anthropocentrism," 56.

[120] Ibid.

community at the top, down to individual members at the bottom, and not so much in Singer's theory, in which the main focus is to dismantle speciesism), is in itself dismissive of humans' personal experiences and emotions towards nature and other beings, which lies at the basis of moral relationships in the most practical and concrete sense, as it will become clearer in the next chapters. In this sense, the second problem with rejecting anthropocentrism is closely connected to the first one: it is wrong to reject anthropocentrism because (1) it suggests that, in order to overcome the Cartesian dualism, one should reject anthropocentrism, which (2) results in a rational approach that posits seemingly objective facts onto nature, thus rejecting humans' personal experiences in and emotions towards it.

This constitutes a problem of moral foundation: the three theories here presented have proven to be problematic not because of the exact criterion for moral status, nor the locus of intrinsic value (let alone the existence or non-existence of this value in nature), but due to the fact that they assume (a) that such a criterion or objective value will be objectively recognized as morally significant by moral agents, and (b) that this will be enough to guide us in our relationship with the subject of moral consideration. This is not possible when one does not take into account humans' experiences and emotions with regards to the object of moral concern: when one, as explained above, rejects anthropocentrism.

1.5.2 - Conclusion

In this sense, these conceptualizations are problematic because they rely too much on reason and rationality, attributing seemingly neutral facts onto nature, and thereby telling us very little with regards to humans' concrete, everyday moral relationships with the natural surroundings (it will be explained in more detail what these entail in chapter 3). This foundational problem — the fact that the extensionist framework is too dependent upon purely rational moral commitments and moral abstracts — stems from the theoretical flaw of perpetuating a Cartesian dualism, which in itself entails the predominance of rationality over humans' experiences and emotions towards the object of moral concern.

Although any decision-making process will always be rationalist, this need not be completely detached from humans' actual feelings and experiences with the natural surroundings.

After all, how do we actually create a more sustainable moral relationship between humans and nature without accounting for the way humans actually feel about nature and to what extent they feel compelled to engage with it with acts of care in their experiences with nature?

In the next chapter, I will look into an eco-phenomenological critique on what extensionism overlooks, focusing on human emotions, lived experiences, and embeddedness. This approach wishes to reclaim anthropocentrism, and with it, first-person experiences in nature, in order to understand what our moral imperatives are. The contrast between extensionism and phenomenology will help, in my view, to see more clearly the importance of focusing on an actual engagement with, and understanding of, nature in order to actively care for it.

This approach will attempt to prove how we do need an emotional component in our moral relationship with non-human beings, and nature as a whole, through an elaboration on the notion of compassion. This is the emotive response that, I shall argue, can truly help us eliminate the persistent ontological separation between humans and non-humans that lies at the basis of environmental degradation.

Chapter 2: A phenomenological framework

In this chapter, I will firstly provide an overview of eco-phenomenology and its critique on extensionism. As seen in the previous chapter, sentientism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism have maintained and reinforced a dualistic legacy, which results in theoretical frameworks that separate the moral agent from the subjects of moral concern by undermining moral agents' experiences with, and emotions towards, the subjects of moral concern. An eco-phenomenological approach, in turn, draws attention to this and presents a clear appeal to humans' understanding of their experiences in nature.

Ian Thomson, in his insightful 2004 analysis of eco-phenomenology, explains how this view holds that moral frameworks disassociated from experiences fail to recognize the intertwinement between humans and nature *"that is basic to our experiential navigation of the lived environment."*[121] Alongside his and Mick Smith's[122] analyses, I will, in section 2.2, mainly focus on Charles Brown's[123] and Ralph Acampora's[124] accounts.

Finally, in section 2.3, I will also offer a critique on eco-phenomenology for being too vague and impractical.

2.1 - An eco-phenomenological response

2.1.1 - Overview

In its origins, phenomenology springs from a rejection of the mechanistic conception of nature briefly discussed at the beginning of chapter 1; it brings to the focus the subjectivity of first-person experience, which, phenomenologists argue, has been eliminated in the rational discourse

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[121] Iain Thomson, "Ontology and Ethics at the Intersection of Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy," *Inquiry* 47, no. 4 (2004): 382.

[122] Mick Smith, "On 'Being' Moved by Nature: Geography, Emotion and Environmental Ethics," in *Emotional Geographies*, ed. Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi and Mick Smith (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 219-30.

[123] Brown, "The Who of Environmental Ethics", 143-58.

[124] Acampora, *Corporal Compassion*.

of modern philosophy.[125] This anticipates environmental philosophers, dating back to Husserl's work. An eco-phenomenological approach, then, concerns both a phenomenological ecology and an ecological phenomenology.[126] This approach has been critical of theories such as Singer's due to the fact that they reject the experiences of non-sentient beings from the sphere of moral concern; at the same time, it offers a perspective radically different from biocentrism and ecocentrism, rooted in the notions of lived experience and embodiment.

Phenomenology stresses the importance of focusing on experiences, what these are like and what these mean, and on phenomena as they appear in lived experiences.[127] It suggests, thus, a co-constitutive relationship between us and the phenomena of nature as we encounter it in our engagement with it. Our surrounding reality is, in this sense, not separate from us and all individuals living in it. The very realities we live and experience are themselves composed of our own perceptions, cultural, social, and biological pre-conditions; the way we respond to external stimuli is a reaction within our own spheres of meaning.[128] In classical Husserlian philosophy, then, the term 'meaning' is defined as the content of the appearances of things in our experiences (i.e. the significance of objects, entities, or beings), which is made up of our own particular images, concepts, ideas, and pre-conditions.[129]

From a phenomenological approach, environmental ethics ought to entail a strong focus on meaning, in order to understand our ethical commitments to nature. Our relationship with nature occurs within an ongoing meaning depending on each one's historicity, and it acts upon us within said ongoing meaning. To understand nature, and thereby to carry out a moral relationship with it, it suggests that we require an understanding of our lived experience of nature and its living beings. Any moral relationship with nature will, thus, never be able to constitute itself from the establishment of intellectual constructions devoid of an understanding of the reality of nature and its living beings as experienced by the self. As Martin Drenthen puts this: *"ethical discernment is*

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[125]   Kalpita Bhar Paul, "Introducing Interpretive Approach of Phenomenological Research Methodology in Environmental Philosophy: A Mode of Engaged Philosophy in the Anthropocene," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 2.

[126] David Wood, "What is eco-phenomenology?" in *Eco-phenomenology: Back to the Earth itself,* ed. Charles Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 231.

[127] David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2018. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>.

[128] Susann M. Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2, no. 3 (2003): 22-24.

[129] Smith, "Phenomenology."

less a matter of intellectual construction than it is one of attunement to a particular way of being-in-place."[130] An ethics of place, thus, as some hermeneutics and phenomenology authors would name it,[131] draws attention to the exercise of placing ourselves in nature and how nature matters to us as it embodies our larger contexts. The theoretical gaze upon nature emerges from experience in-place; it is here, then, that we begin to ascribe moral significance to nature.[132]

A phenomenological approach to nature, thus, is an exercise in rejecting fixed assumptions about said nature and all living beings based on static categorizations and conceptualizations. Nature, according to phenomenology, is instead perceived by us as a reality embedded in meaning and never truly separated from individuals — meanings that we create and act upon according to our perspectives, contexts, and experiences; meanings that are themselves constituents of our own existence as individuals, not separated and objectively present in entities or individuals outside of ourselves.[133]

The reality of nature is not, according to this perspective, straightforwardly separated from us, waiting to be ascribed intrinsic value or some other moral property. Instead, it is a co-constituent of humans' lives. Our lived experiences of nature, animals, or other living beings do not simply happen to take place *in* nature, but they occur *with* nature.[134]

One cannot, thus, address nature in relation to us in an ontological dualism, as both humans and nature — be these non-human animals or other living beings — depend upon each other for their sense-making. Our lived experiences of nature emerge from particular ways of relating ourselves to others; likewise, nature reveals itself to us in certain ways depending on our human perspectives. Meaning, in this sense, is *"tied to understanding and thus a — historical — human perspective."*[135]

This approach has offered an extensive critique on extensionism, to which I turn below.

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[130] Martin Drenthen, "Environmental hermeneutics and the meaning of nature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, ed. Stephen Mark Gardiner and Allen Thompson (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Wolff-Michael Roth, *First-Person Methods: Toward an Empirical Phenomenology of Experience* (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2012), 112-13.

[133] Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology," 23.

[134] Ibid, 22.

[135] Drenthen, "Environmental hermeneutics," 8.

2.1.2 - A response to sentientism

With regards to Singer's sentientism, a phenomenological approach would claim that it is flawed insofar as it decreases openness to the experiences of different individuals by insisting on rationalist appeals to establish moral relationships. It would also claim that it is flawed insofar as it rejects the ongoing meanings of non-sentient beings.[136] Singer, however, would say this is not problematic, as it would not change the allocation of moral status — which, he believes, belongs exclusively to sentient beings. And yet, a phenomenological approach would still argue that it is problematic not because of the exact criterion for moral status, but because of the nature of Singer's moral framework. This theory relies on a rationalist, fixed intellectual foundation that itself impairs the provision of a space able to articulate different meanings. When one is not able to understand one's own and others' meanings in a shared space, one is unable to develop the notion of 'ethical feeling'.[137]

It is through this understanding of nature, ourselves, and thereby others *in* nature, this approach claims, that ethical feeling — the recognition of a moral imperative — and action upon it emerge.[138] Thus, through experience, we can grasp how nature *does* mean something to us and the importance of recognizing its moral significance. As Mick Smith writes in his 16th chapter of *Emotional Geographies*, an ethical relationship with nature *"does indeed entail a manner of our 'being-there' (Dasein) that finds itself emotionally re-oriented in relation to significant (and often non-human) others."*[139] The notion of 'Dasein' comes from Heidegger's radically new notion of the self as a, in Thomson's words, *"being-here, that is, a temporally-structured making-intelligible of the place in which I happen to find myself"*.[140] Apropos, Smith adds later on in the same text,

> Springs do in some sense 'speak' to me, they affect me, move me, altering my understanding of my relations to my surrounding environment. Their activities make me attend to the modes in which they present and express themselves and, just as with other humans, they thereby acquire meaning

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[136] Gregory John Leaney, "Flourishing in the flesh of the interworld: ecophenomenological intertwining and environmental virtue ethics" (PhD diss., University of New South Wales, 2012), 178-181.
[137] Smith, "On 'Being' Moved by Nature," 220.
[138] Brown, "The Who of Environmental Ethics", 143-58.
[139] Smith, "On 'Being' Moved by Nature," 220.
[140] Thomson, "Ontology and Ethics," 401.

and value, they become significant. [...] nature is a dead-letter only to those 'moderns' who have lost the ability to listen to and interpret the non-human world.[141]

Although Singer would not necessarily disagree with the words above, he would still say that the ability to suffer or to feel pain provides a relevant difference between 'springs' and sentient beings. However, eco-phenomenology is not so much concerned with the allocation of moral status, but rather with the connection between ethical feeling and moral action, and vice-versa. Since ethical feeling concerns the recognition of moral imperatives, it is linked to an actual engagement with nature with acts of care, this approach suggests. As opposed to rationalist methodologies, eco-phenomenology proposes to eliminate the distancing effect between the rational recognition of moral consideration and our first-person bodily and emotional experiences with the object of concern. It criticizes theories such as Singer's, thus, for separating reason from emotion and hence appealing to an *"emotionally, and hence ethically meaningless world."*[142]

As shown in the previous chapter, the process of assimilation, entailed in Singer's ethical extensionism, is developed through the creation and reinforcement of an ontological dualism, which ultimately means distance and separation, as a result the intellectual constructions. By insisting on these constructions, on fixed (and often restricted) moral abstracts, disassociated from experiences as the basis for our moral relationships with nature, we are, eco-phenomenologists argue, disassociating ourselves from *ethical feeling*, from truly being able to recognize other living beings as morally significant.[143]

This ontological separation results, thus, in a separation between reason and emotion — which, instead of allowing moral agents to feel compelled to approach nature with acts of care, simply dictates moral imperatives from reasoning and cost-benefit analyses. We are therefore unable, as Mick Smith writes, to be *"moved by nature"*.[144] According to Singer's effective altruism, however, being moved is not only unnecessary for moral deliberation but also counter-productive.[145] It is much more efficient in terms of promoting the most possible good, Singer would say, to donate monthly a percentage from our salaries to any NGO that claims to save forests

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[141] Smith, "On 'Being' Moved by Nature," 222.

[142] Mick Smith, "Citizens, Denizens and the Res Publica: Environmental Ethics, Structures of Feeling and Political Expression," *Environmental Values* 14, no. 2 (2005): 154.

[143] Smith, "On 'Being' Moved by Nature," 220.

[144] Ibid, 219-30.

[145] Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, 67.

or promote biodiversity, rather than seeking to understand what is that makes us feel compelled to create and sustain a healthier relationship with nature that protects forests and biodiversity. I will come back to this point in chapter 3.

2.1.3 - A response to biocentrism and ecocentrism

In the same way, with regards to biocentrism and ecocentrism, eco-phenomenologists would claim that moral imperatives cannot be intellectually recognized without a situated, lived experience of the body. Rather, these are apprehended by the confrontation with physical phenomena through corporal engagement — which is done by intentionality, phenomenology's key concept — which then leads to a response to said encountered phenomena (I shall also say more about both intentionality and this response in the next section). This inevitably entails trial and error in our experience and sense-making of nature, rather than final solutions. We become, then, selves-in-relation and no longer discrete individuals who appeal to theoretical and metaphysical absolute answers for our relationship with nature.

Although both Taylor and Callicott challenge the idea of lifelessness and deadness in nature, typical of a Cartesian view on the natural environment, as they ascribe it (either in terms of its individual members or nature as a whole) an objective intrinsic value, they do so by dictating what a moral agent should rationally adhere to, and hence neglecting the quest for understanding nature and one's place in the biotic community. Instead of an appeal for final, absolute answers, this phenomenological approach seeks direct, physical experience with nature, claiming it can offer us a better understanding of how one should indeed care for nature. Whereas abstract notions such as 'inherent worth' are indeed ambitious moral absolutes in the fight against human chauvinism and speciesism, they do not allow for any sense-making to take place, for they precede experiences, eco-phenomenologists claim.[146] This sense-making is what allows moral phenomena to actually take place, and thus form our relationship with nature.[147] Nonetheless, this critique on the perpetuation of the logic of separation should not deny the fact that these authors do stress the

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[146] Brown, "The Who of Environmental Ethics," 156-57.
[147] Smith, "On 'Being' Moved by Nature," 220.

importance of interdependence between beings. This is, as explained in the first chapter, very central to Callicott's ethical system, but Taylor also includes this in his theory.[148]

Charles Brown, in his eco-phenomenological approach to environmental philosophy, indeed criticizes the above theories for being, in Thomson's words, too *"formal, proceduralist"*[149] attempts. He stresses, again, the importance of lived experience, whereby we *"regularly find the world and the things within it to be infused with value".*[150] Only this way can one go through the process of, borrowing Smith's term, *"ethical becoming"* — *"of forming a sense of appropriate action and of one's place in a community."*[151] It is through this process that one is able to position and reposition oneself within an ethical relation.[152]

Upon this understanding, as I will further explain in the next section, the agent can develop an actual response to the physical phenomena encountered in corporal engagement with nature. This response is an *emotive* one, which translates to acts of care towards nature. In this next section, I will elaborate on the idea of an emotive response in our experiences with nature, according to Charles Brown's account, followed by, in section 2.3, an elaboration on the emotion of compassion in Ralph Acampora's theory.[153]

2.2 - Emotive responses in our experiences with nature

Phenomenological understanding, as briefly mentioned above, is guided by intentionality. This notion may be understood as the meaningful structure of experience, which exposes a sense of directedness towards situations, objects, and states of affairs.[154] An intentional experience, then, takes place upon facing the *"ultimate structures of consciousness"* — the essences that identify and distinguish experiences as *"unique from others".*[155]

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[148] Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 116-18.
[149] Thomson, "Ontology and Ethics," 388.
[150] Charles Brown, "The Real and the Good," in *Eco-phenomenology: Back to the Earth itself*, ed. Charles Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 11.
[151] Smith, "On 'Being' Moved by Nature," 225.
[152] Ibid, 221.
[153] Acampora, *Corporal Compassion*.
[154] Max van Manen and Catherine Adams, "Phenomenology," in *International Encyclopedia of Education*, vol. 6, ed. Eva Baker and Barry McGaw (Oxford: Elsevier, 2010), 449-55.
[155] Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology," 23.

The intentionality of the experience of nature, Charles Brown explains, as it directs one's focus, exposes the rational content within said experience — *"a form of emergent rationality in everyday bodily behavior and experience"*[156] —, which in turn enables us to understand it. This understanding is built in a dialogue with the natural world, and not as an atomist or solipsistic inwardness, typical of Cartesian philosophy.[157] Intentionality is, in this way, the foundation of rationality, which reveals self-awareness and a sense of self.[158] When we focus on the cognitive content within our experience with nature, we can see that moral imperatives are dependent on emotional and bodily meaning[159] — which, as explained before, has been ignored by modern ethics.[160] Let us look closer into this.

As phenomenology tells us, bodily subjectivity is the primary source for perceiving, engaging, and making sense of the world. With the use of one's bodily senses, one is able to make sense of nature, its living beings and natural elements, and hence see the world as coherent and meaningful. One does this, as Brown tells us,

> by constructing the individual identities of things through a blending of diverse perspectives into a coherent and stable gestalt of meaning. I take in the world through my bodily senses, identifying and making sense of the things around me. I reach out to touch the thing I visually perceive. Its resistance and solidity confirm the original sense presented through vision.[161]

Human bodily subjectivity is, thus, bodily intentionality.[162] We are able to see the world as a shared world, whereby not only my own experiences but also those of other living beings, animals and plants, build and transform every being's understanding of the world. The terms 'understanding' and 'experience', when applied to plants and less complex animals, are obviously used in a rather broad sense which may entail any kind of chemical signalling, sensory system, or ability to react to external stimuli. Humans are not the only ones responding to the world. Our bodily self-awareness makes us aware of the bodies of others, as well as their well-being and

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[156] Brown, "The Who of Environmental Ethics," 146.
[157] Ibid, 152.
[158] Ibid, 148.
[159] Ibid, 145-49.
[160] Ibid, 152.
[161] Ibid, 148.
[162] Ibid, 149.

vulnerability. Moreover, experiencing and making sense of the natural world, reveals the world as a space whereby ecological goods such as air, water, sun, and soil are shared and equally appreciated. The world constructed from our bodily encounters reveals how our engagements with the world are entangled with those of others in the biotic community. It reveals nature as a communal space, whereby loss, death, flourishing, and richness are shared.[163]

This way, as moral agents, as opposed to any other living being, our encountering and sense-making of the world entails feelings of moral assessment. It is through experience that one *feels* moral imperatives. However, these moral imperatives, although they stem from experiencing nature, are not mere reactions to external stimuli, but something that displays intentionality, which enables us to either morally approve or disapprove a certain experience or act.[164] There is, thus, rationality within moral *experience*: experience, once regarded as a confused pot of unstructured emotions, devoid of meaning and reason, contains, in fact, rational content.

This will allow an ethical relationship with nature as an expression of, in Plumwood's terms, a *"self-in-relation"*.[165] This self-in-relation is not a self detached from emotion — who simply defines others in relation to oneself (as explained in section 1.2) and who extends one's essential properties to other beings in order to ascribe them moral consideration. Rather, it is a self who experiences nature as being part, or a manifestation, of the biotic community, and whose experiences in the natural world are embedded in moral meaning.[166] Making sense of nature through our encounter with it helps, thus, to build our self-identity as moral agents whose experiences are intertwined with other beings' experiences, and hence form a closer relation between self and nature. Opening up ourselves to this understanding is, again, taking part in the process of ethical becoming. It is then that we become able to recognize others as subjects of moral concern and thereby reveal emotive responses to what becomes a moral imperative.

I will now elaborate on the emotive response of compassion in particular, in light of Acampora's work.

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[163] Ibid, 149.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Val Plumwood, "Nature, self, and gender, feminism, environmental philosophy, and the critique of rationalism," *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (1991): 3-27.
[166] Brown, "The Who of Environmental Ethics," 152-55.

2.3 - Embeddedness and compassion in human-nature relationships

The response of compassion, an eco-phenomenological approach argues, naturally derives from the process of understanding nature and ethical becoming. The definition of this notion draws inspiration from Ralph Acampora's *Corporal Compassion* work[167].

In his book, Acampora's notion of compassion, partially inspired by Hume's basis for human ethics, calls attention to the common corporeality we share with non-human animals. This corporeal commonality is, in his words, called 'symphysis', and it is closely related to Hume's idea of innate sympathy.[168] Rather than simply calling for rational moral commitments, existing beliefs or values, one should focus on the importance of experiences, particularly those which unveil our sense of compassionate kinship. Let us look closer into this.

Acampora elaborates on a framework that claims to provide us with a solution for our encounters with animals[169]. Through a phenomenological approach, we discover that one's own presence in the world is a revealing source of what we come to understand and believe about life.[170] This refers to the ways in which the world we live in resonates within our acts of experiencing. It is based on this resonance that we learn about what is that surrounds us and how we ought to behave with our surroundings. He seeks a philosophical elaboration of 'experienced bodiment'[171] and an ethics for human-animal relationships which proposes to *"ground moral compassion for other animals in the sensation of sharing carnal vulnerability"*.[172] As moral agents in possession of consciousness and capacity to reason, humans are aware of their corporal vulnerability (i.e. the fact that human bodies are the locus of pain and illness); this awareness concerns our organic, animal matter, according to Acampora.[173]

His philosophical exploration has some resonances with Singer's appeal for sentience: the stress on the commonality of the lived body is very much based on aspects of sentient life. In this

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[167] Acampora, *Corporal Compassion*.
[168] Bernard Rollin, "Corporal Compassion: Animal Ethics and Philosophy of Body," *Anthrozoös* 20, no. 2 (2007): 204.
[169] Scott D. Churchill, "Empathy, Intercorporeality, and the Call to Compassion," *Society and Animals* 18, no. 2 (2010): 221.
[170] Ibid, 220.
[171] Acampora, *Corporal Compassion*, 49.
[172] Ralph Acampora, "Continental Approaches to Animals and Animality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*, ed. Linda Kalof (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 171.
[173] Acampora, *Corporal Compassion*, 130.

sense, the author is again a proponent of relations built on similarity — or, in his words, *"mutuality"*[174] —, pointing out how difference, as the basis for ethical relationships, forecloses any recognition of symphysis. However, Acampora does not focus on the ability to feel pain or pleasure per se, but on the fact that we possess the awareness of this mutuality so that we develop compassion. In fact, his notion of compassion does not merely concern moral psychology, but has to do with corporal symphysis as having a *"sense of sharing with somebody else a live nexus as experienced in a somatic setting of direct or systemic (inter)relationship."*[175] This has not so much to do with the mental status of sympathy or empathy, but more so with, as exemplified by the author, pregnancy and breastfeeding, physical cooperation, or any *"sensing tools or enclosures as extensions of one's body."*[176] This awareness of intercorporeality[177] is, thus, not based on purely rational moral commitments to others, nor does it derive from them. Rather, it is about the importance of experiences in order to understand our mutualities with other beings and other beings' natural surroundings.

Acampora draws some inspiration from Levinas' theory of face-to-face relation,[178] explaining that the self only exists upon the recognition of the other as a being who shares things with me[179] (e.g. in a public park, both the human sitting on the bench and the random squirrel up on the tree share vulnerability and susceptibility to what that space has to offer; they are both targets of ecological and biological processes or transformations). As the recognition of the other arrives at me, I recognize our mutuality which, in turn, leads to a compassionate concern. It is, according to the author, not so much a purely reflective recognition, but a recognition based on shared experiences and embeddedness. As opposed to Singer's, Taylor's, and even Callicott's theories, reasoning *alone* only works to justify rationally why we ought to care for others.[180] As Acampora explains, only a somatology of how we see ourselves as animals, as beings with corporal flesh dependent upon ecological and biological phenomena, can lead us to a kind of sensitivity and concern for other beings.[181]

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[174] Acampora, "Continental Approaches to Animals," 171.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Acampora, *Corporal Compassion*, 72.
[178] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Duquesne University Press, 1985).
[179] Acampora, "Continental Approaches to Animals," 172.
[180] Ibid, 171.
[181] Ibid, 178.

This is closely linked to the notion of biophilia. As mentioned in the first chapter, the biophilia hypothesis claims that humans have innately a moralistic sense or experience of nature and other beings, one that entails feelings of ethical responsibility and even compassion.[182] This is often illustrated with communities of indigenous people, who arguably show a record of taking better care of nature than other human, urban-living communities. In *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, one reads how many of these groups reveal *"a conviction of the continuous reciprocity between humans and nature, and the certainty of an inextricable link between human identity and the natural landscape."*[183]

In this sense, and upon this sort of ecological awakening whereby we become aware of our corporal mutualities with other beings, we become ecologically informed selves that understand the surrounding world through experience and intentionality in experiencing nature. From this naturally follows the emotive response of compassion. As a response to a moral imperative, it is both *"an emotional and ethical disposition"*[184] towards other beings. The sense-making of encounters through corporeal experience leads us to appreciate morally relevant aspects of nature and nature's beings — and this leads us to compassion. This compassionate dimension is, thus, able to link rationality with emotion, dissolving the separation between the two seen in the previous theories. In this sense, human-nature fundamental separation starts to disappear, according to this view, once we focus on experiences of the lived body. Experience is, thus, important to eliminate dualistic constructions of nature, which offer an easy justification for a human-nature relationship based on exploitative instrumental valuation. The extensionist strategy for our relationship with non-human beings dismisses the importance of experience, maintaining the dominant dualistic narrative, and thus failing to promote acts of care or any relationship with nature based on compassion.

And yet, this approach does not suggest dissolving the Cartesian dualism by simply falling into the opposite extreme, as seen in biocentrism and, especially, ecocentrism. Rather, it proposes simply to offer an account in which human beings in and with nature are not just agentic, but also selves in relation, thus privileging continuity between beings. In this sense, anthropocentrism does seem relevant for the call of first-person experiences and moral imperatives directed towards living

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[182] Stephen R. Kellert, "The Biological Basis for Human Values of Nature," in *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2013), 53.
[183] Ibid, 54.
[184] Smith, "On 'Being' Moved by Nature," 222.

beings from the experiences of moral agents. This anthropocentrism entails, in this sense, a conception of moral agents in an active relationship with nature and it accounts for the way humans feel about nature and in nature, so we can understand how and to what extent we are compelled to engage with it with acts of care.

In the next section, I will present some difficulties offered by this approach on a practical level for our moral relationship with nature.

2.4 - Eco-phenomenology in practice?

We have seen so far how this account offers, on a theoretical level, a contrast to the previous framework, solving the ontological separation between reason and emotion, and thus human and nature. However, in light of its critique against theories that rely too much on rationality and theorization, and its strong emphasis on lived experiences, an analysis of more concrete and practical terms should not be ignored.

This account begs the question, firstly, of how we can actually assure that everyone will feel compassion towards nature. How do we know, after all, whether this emotive response can be true for any human being? This question seems particularly appropriate in light of our contemporary, urban societies, whereby human living is arguably rather detached from nature. This, of course, depends on one's definition of nature. I, personally, could claim that my backyard garden *is* nature, whose space I occupy, whose smells I enjoy, whose visiting birds I watch, whose flowers and trees I cherish. Is this enough, then, to claim that I am experiencing nature, understanding my place in it, and therefore engaging with it with acts of care?

Although I will here assume that my backyard garden *is*, in fact, part of nature,[185] I would still claim that this engagement with one's backyard does not reveal compassion for nature as a whole in any representative way, especially so if, at the same time, one refuses to reduce one's ecological footprint, induces unnecessary suffering upon non-human animals, and is careless about

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[185] Some philosophers would not classify this as nature, such as Eric Katz. However, due to the scope of this thesis, I will not be addressing this and will solely build my argumentation under the assumption that it is nature. See Eric Katz, "Restoration and Redesign: The Ethical Significance of Human Intervention in Nature," *Restoration and Management Notes* 9 (1991): 90–6. And Eric Katz, *Nature as Subject* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

the ecological crisis in general. Therefore, it seems more relevant to focus on one's behaviour towards nature as a whole in general terms.

An eco-phenomenological approach that rests its case on a theoretical pursuit of explaining that moral agents will develop the emotive response upon the understanding of one's own experience in nature can very well be the target of exactly the same counter-argument presented against Singer's and the other extensionists: is this phenomenological theory not also dictating that this will happen and that, thereby, it suffices as a moral framework? What do we say, then, about the person who indeed goes through the phenomenological endeavour of understanding her place in nature and recognizes the mutuality between her animate flesh and other beings' organic matter, and yet still decides to consciously destroy nature (e.g. by continuously flying to different parts of the world; by polluting the streets with trash; by investing in corporations who are responsible for mass deforestation, etc.)? And by this I am keeping in mind someone who is *aware* of the climate crisis and the harms related to air travel and deforestation respectively and is somehow in a position able to change her behaviour. Is this not just another intellectual construal that relies too much on a system of theorization and, consequently, fails to properly assess how humans can indeed feel compelled to engage with nature with acts of care?

Secondly, one might ask what this all would mean in practice. How can we put into practice an in-place experience? Or how would corporal compassion translate into our daily lives? Furthermore, although the authors presented make an interesting case around the importance of understanding how we are all, in the end, similar insofar as we are part of nature, one needs to be careful, as Thomson writes, when applying this to ecological wholes, such as ecosystems, habitats, and species, so as to not compromise ethical urgency.[186] Insofar as the *other*, in the case of the entire environment (and not in the simple case of the squirrel in the public park), has its organic existence all over the place, we need to assure this framework is not too vague to be applied in practice.

I would still argue that Acampora's and Brown's appeal for an emotive response can be used in a more practical sense. Let us see.

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[186] Thomson, "Ontology and Ethics," 401.

2.4.1 - Compassion in practice

Compassion, in general terms, is defined as the *"sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it."*[187] In this sense, it calls for a position in the world *in relation* to others, whereby the self (a) understands the limitations of her perspectives but nonetheless recognizes the other's experiences and (b) conscientiously (or simply intuitively) feels the moral imperative to engage in acts of care. It has, thus, an inherent practical component whereby a link between recognition of moral concern through experience and engagement in the practice of care in the sphere of concrete action is made. In this sense, applying compassion in a more concrete meaning tells us that moral agents can be seen as selves-in-relation that do not necessarily possess an objective awareness or apprehension of what nature is (or whether it possesses an independent, intrinsic value). Rather, moral agents should be seen as mere possessors of, again in Smith's words, an *"engaged understanding of someone who must act."*[188] This is always a situational knowledge, never objective, final, or universal.

The point, thus, should not be to defend nature's intrinsic value and completely denounce any instrumentality in nature (we, as beings in possession of animate flesh, depend, just like any other being, on the use of ecological goods, such as the soil and trees), but to transform our own understanding of ourselves in nature, in order to be able to engage with it in a more sustainable way. In order to do so, we need not a purely abstract eco-phenomenological approach that seems to assume that agents will develop compassion towards nature, nor necessarily to preach the phenomenological notion of corporal compassion per se. Instead, what we need, I would argue, is a political exercise that puts in practice the appeal for compassion and embraces emotional components into various institutional endeavours in order to help individuals and collectives feel not so separated from nature. After all, the practical component of our moral framework to approach nature should be the most relevant aspect in light of our ecological crisis.[189]

Acampora's idea that we share a sort of similarity with animals — which I apply here to other non-human beings and nature as a whole — is valuable as it helps us to position ourselves in the shoes of others. I suggest that this need not imply a necessary, causal explanation for the

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[187] Merriam-Webster, s.v. "compassion".
[188] Smith, "On 'Being' Moved by Nature," 224.
[189] Andrew, "Contemporary Environmental Ethics", 435.

development of a feeling of compassion and of the need to treat others with acts of care. On the contrary, it can simply work, politically speaking, as an individual and collective continuous exercise.

As Acampora and Brown would claim, by realizing our corporal, mutual experience, which takes form in the realization of how we are all vulnerable to the same crucial experiences, such as death, loss, and illness (not just as animals, but as organisms in the world, just like plants and ecosystems), we are somehow *closer* to nature. This awareness, I suggest, can be fed by political institutions, and exercised by individuals and collectives, in an effort to, indeed, show how compassion may have a strong relevance in moral action and decision-making with regards to our relationship with nature.

In this sense, I should add, a practical appeal for a notion of compassion with nature does not suggest that a direct relationship with nature as a whole is even possible. Holmes Rolston, apropos, draws attention to the fact that one cannot ever directly encounter the entirety of nature. He argues:

> one cannot encounter (see, hear, taste, touch or feel) nature-as-a-whole, only more or less specific processes or products that come to focus out of the whole, such as a lion or the rain. These natural 'objects' always show up when we are in some relation to them, constituting these relationships.[190]

The notion of compassion towards nature can work, rather, to build one's perception of individual and collective duties towards nature in its most varied (and concrete) occurrences, not just with one's own backyard garden, but also with one's way of consumption, use of natural resources, engagement with other animals, and other daily habits. It is this more practical meaning that I shall give use to from here on. This practical meaning, again, is not entirely dependent on purely reflective and rational moral commitments to nature, but rather entails a relevant emotional component in moral actions, as I shall explain in chapter 3.

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[190] Holmes Rolston, "Nature for Real: Is Nature a Social Construct?," in *The Philosophy of the Environment*, ed. Timothy Chappel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 41.

2.4.2 - Conclusion

We have seen so far that, from experience, one can generate a perspective from a self-in-relation who relates to living beings as objects of care. The ethical imperatives, eco-phenomenologists claim, are issued forth from this experience. It is with compassion that we, while being *in* nature, can see ourselves as a constituent part *of* nature. The concept of compassion, not as a presuppositional intellectually recognized imperative, but as a response to our corporeal experiences in nature, ascertains our moral obligation to care *for* nature.

Now, in order to make a more practical and applicable appeal for our moral framework for human-nature relationships, I shall argue in chapter 3 how this idea, when applied into a political endeavour, effectively reveals the relevance of an emotional component for moral action and decision-making.

Chapter 3: An institutional framework

So far, we have seen how eco-phenomenology offers an interesting counterproposal to more rationalist, contemporary environmental ethics theories, stressing the importance of accounting for humans' understanding of experiences in, and compassion for, nature and all living beings. This approach has offered an insightful rejection of human-nature dualism and shifted the focus away from abstract notions of value theory to moral agents' mutualities with objects of moral concern and to an emotional component in moral action. And yet, although this framework solves extensionist flaws on a theoretical level, it can still lack applicability, as we have seen.

A sense of practicality is of utmost importance — which is not to say that environmental ethics should focus excessively on pragmatism per se, but rather on creating reasonable grounds for frameworks with a strong public utility.[191] Or, as Andrew Light would say in his appeal for a more public philosophy, *"their* [theories of environmental ethics'] *resolution in more practical terms is more important than their resolution in philosophical terms at the present time."*[192] Following this idea, I will now present what I believe to be, applied into the political and institutional sphere, a more concrete standpoint that recognizes the importance of an emotional component in making agents compelled to engage with nature with acts of care, offered by eco-phenomenology, as well as understands the importance of rationality and systems of rules, offered by ethical extensionism. I will, thus, suggest a position that embraces anthropocentrism in the recognition of both human difference from and similarity to nature in a more practical sense, linked to institutional and state action.

To develop this perspective, I will elaborate on Christian Schemmel's analysis of a relational dimension in institutions,[193] arguing that the very framework for our relationship with nature needs to be embedded in institutional and state discourse, in order to help create a public understanding of moral obligation and urgency. I will focus on this account in order to draw a link with human-nature relationships, elaborating on what the role of institutions ought to be. I will then, in section 3.2, elaborate on collective compassion.

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[191] Mirjam de Groot, Martin Drenthen, and Wouter de Groot, "Public Visions of the Human/Nature Relationship and Their Implications for Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 33, no. 1 (2011): 35.
[192] Light, "Contemporary Environmental Ethics," 435.
[193] Schemmel, "Distributive and Relational Equality," 123-148.

3.1 - Institutional attitudes

Christian Schemmel has been amongst the most prominent authors in the development of expressive dimensions in institutions, which aim at analysing the inherent meaning of institutional action. In his account, Schemmel links his expressive theory to a theory of relational egalitarianism: the latter advocates for an alternative to distributive justice, which has been primarily concerned with a fair distribution of benefits and burdens in some domain, making use of a certain metric (e.g. resources, welfare, capabilities, etc.) and a certain rule (e.g. equality, sufficiency, market norms, etc.).[194] Schemmel, along with other critics of accounts of distributive justice, has claimed that these theories miss something relevant: they do not account for social and cultural aspects such as recognition, respect, status, shame, stigma, domination, or marginalization.[195] Relational egalitarianism is thus concerned with these group-based phenomena,[196] stressing the importance of relationships, representations, and public discourse.

Depending on the authors,[197] this theory does not simply concern the relationships between individuals, but also between these and institutions and the government — particularly in Schemmel's account.[198] As Kristin Voigt writes in her analysis of relational equality: *"[s]uch accounts identify as problematic, for example, intentionally harmful treatment of individual citizens (or groups) by institutions"*.[199] What is at stake, then, is an emotional and attitudinal component attached to actions and collective behaviours — the intention behind —, which, in turn, influences the way people experience certain phenomena and how they *feel* about them.

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[194] Julian Lamont and Christi Favor. "Distributive Justice," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/justice-distributive/>.

[195] Schemmel, "Distributive and Relational Equality," 126-27. See also: Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3.

[196] Iris Marion Young, "Equality of Whom? Social Groups and Judgments of Injustice," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2001): 1–18.

[197] For instance, Elizabeth Anderson. See Elizabeth Anderson, "Toward a Non-Ideal, Relational Methodology for Political Philosophy: Comments on Schwartzman's 'Challenging Liberalism'," *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 130–45.

[198] Kristin Voigt, "Relational Equality and the Expressive Dimension of State Action," *Social Theory and Practice* 44, no. 3 (2018): 439.

[199] Ibid.

According to relational egalitarians, institutions ought to express equal concern for individuals,[200] and not merely provide equal rights or resources. In this sense, relational egalitarianism is primarily concerned with the way institutional structures and functions impose, communicate, and express elements of oppression or other forms of injustice;[201] it is not so much focused on the outcomes, but rather on the method certain solutions are brought up with, arguing the latter is a matter of justice: institutional and governmental treatment of, expressive conduct towards, and emotional appeal to certain problems is, indeed, a matter of justice.[202] This theory, thus, places an important and novel focus on an emotional and expressive link between individuals and institutions.

Far from advocating for egalitarianism (relational or not) between human beings and all non-human beings, however, I will rather focus on this emotional link between individuals and institutions this account has appealed to, as a powerful tool for moral action and, thus, as a key element in our moral relationship with the environment.

3.1.1 - Institutional attitudes to the environment

Institutions, I argue, also ought to express, in light of the current environmental crisis, a certain attitude towards the natural surrounding and its living members that allows moral agents, individuals and collectives, to go through the process of understanding our place on earth and, therefore, to feel compelled to engage with nature with acts of care. This need not mean, say, regarding all non-human animals as equal citizens in our communities, but rather understanding organic mutualities between us and them (as well as plants and entire ecosystems), as we have seen in Acampora's account, which in turn promotes feelings of compassion. Compassion, thus, should be both an (1) attitudinal tool of expressive concern on behalf of institutional and state action and (2) the emotive response of individual citizens to care for nature promoted by the institutional attitude. This double function of compassion, as both an attitude and an emotion, is relevant, I believe, to understand our position as individuals and collectives with regards to nature.

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[200] Ibid, 442.
[201] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 3.
[202] Schemmel, "Distributive and Relational Equality," 125.

It encompasses, as it will become clearer throughout this chapter, the relevant aspects of both extensionism and eco-phenomenology.

The same way a relational egalitarian worries about how attitudes of states influence individuals' feelings about and attitudes with one another (one might think, for example, of how misogynistic institutional attitudes reinforce and validate certain behaviour men have towards women), I would also argue that we should pay attention to the way state actions influence the emotive response and ordinary discourse of the general public with regards to the environment, which ultimately concerns our moral actions, as individuals and as members of collectives, in many spheres (e.g. consumption habits, recycling practices, land use, etc.). Voigt argues that, when states and institutions express harmful attitudes towards certain groups of people (e.g. discrimination, oppression, stigma, etc.), such attitudes carry *"the disruption to constitutionally underwritten public understandings about the appropriate structure of values in some arena of public action."*[203] The same way, I would argue, when states and institutions express harmful attitudes with regards to the environment (e.g. *neglect* towards biodiversity, *cruelty* towards wildlife, *irresponsibility* with regards to CO2 emissions), these attitudes impact the way people feel about the environment, and about the environmental crisis specifically, shaping the general understanding about how each one should behave and relate to nature.

These institutional attitudes, Voigt explains, are identified as expressive *wrongs* as they cause expressive *harms*,[204] for their primary impact is one that disrupts the collective understanding of one's position in and moral duties towards nature. Morally problematic attitudes implicit in state action, such as the neglect for endangered species, can very well lead, I argue, to a morally problematic relationship between individuals and nature, one that might take form in feeling indifference, and even despise, towards other beings' survival, well-being, and flourishing.

Of course one might argue that states and institutions are composed by individuals, so that what we are ultimately concerned with are individuals and their attitudes/emotions towards other living beings and their natural surroundings. However, as Schemmel argues, collective actions can very well express certain attitudes not necessarily shared by the individuals,[205] because within institutions there are certain constitutions and defined common endeavours, which make them

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[203] Voigt, "Relational Equality," 447.
[204] Ibid, 445-448.
[205] Schemmel, "Distributive and Relational Equality," 135-36.

distinctive agents capable of expressing *"normative attitudes in their actions"*.[206] This does not require, as the author explains, the possession of the mental state of a *feeling*.[207] And yet, I should add, individual moral agents do have such mental states. Therefore, my main point is that, by expressing certain attitudes, not only do institutions treat nature in a certain way, but they impact the public understanding about the way people should treat it and relate to it.

This institutional, expressive dimension, thus, plays a relevant role in the public understanding of the urgency of a new relationship towards nature. And such an institutional attitude, I argue, should be one that expresses compassion for all living forms. As seen in the previous chapter, the emotion of compassion, in my view, has an inherent practical sense, with which one is able to understand the limited scope of one's point of view and yet recognize others' experiences, which is coupled with the desire to alleviate suffering and/or promote wellbeing. The practice of care is present in the realm of concrete action, which provides us with a strong advantage if, after all, our aim is to help improve people's relationship with the environment, not just theoretically, but also in practice.

By adopting a compassionate attitude through institutional action, then, we not only perform acts of care towards nature, but we also help individuals, in and out of the work of institutions, go through the process of understanding their experiences in nature — one which eco-phenomenologists would call, as quoted above from Mick Smith's work, an "*engaged understanding of someone who must act.*"[208]

Thus, as Voigt tells us, *"state action should be evaluated not just with respect to its direct effects but also with respect to what it expresses."*[209] This expressive account on the work of institutions in their treatment of non-human beings and ecological wholes is, I believe, a more nuanced evaluation of institutional action and policy — which reveals itself as more practical and concrete, for it allows us to assess what a new moral relationship between humans and nature actually asks from institutions and their work in society. This, I believe, constitutes a rather applicable framework, which seems to me valuable in light of the current ecological crisis.

Moreover, this framework is one that is able to translate the focus on rationality and systems of rules, offered by extensionism, as well as the focus on emotions, experiences, and

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[206] Ibid, 136.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Smith, "On 'Being' Moved by Nature," 224.
[209] Voigt, "Relational Equality," 463.

engaged understandings, offered by eco-phenomenology: on the one hand, this institutional work entails the moral commitment to invest in compassionate intentions behind actions and it should be built around this "rule"; on the other hand, it concerns an expressive dimension not found in purely rationalist accounts that heavily rely on moral abstracts and secure, final criteria for moral consideration. Institutional intentions can be *rational*, but they ultimately concern the kind of *emotions* they provoke and help engrave in society's understanding of human-nature moral relationships. It places, thus, an important focus on anthropocentric experiences and understandings.

Several accounts have paid attention to nature and all living beings as recipients of compassion and the importance of thinking about this in the political arena. I will now take a closer look into these, particularly Mick Smith's.[210]

3.2 - Expressing collective compassion

Evolutionary analyses of compassion, such as those of researchers like Randolph Nesse,[211] have shown how compassion, in evolutionary terms, has played a crucial role in building cooperation amongst different individuals outside of the family circles, which in turn allows them to form and sustain altruistic relationships in a reciprocal way.[212] It is argued, in this sense, that compassion springs as an evolutionary motivation to the creation of altruism amongst individuals and communities. This motivation, moreover, was since early on related to normative values in many societies that rewarded cooperative and altruistic behaviour.[213]

This very emotional trait, according to many gene-culture coevolutionary accounts, works to increase cooperation, *"trustworthy behavior and mutually beneficial exchanges among individuals not bound by kin relations."*[214] It contains a guiding component in individual and

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[210] Smith, "Citizens, Denizens and the Res Publica," 145–62.

[211] Randolph M. Nesse, "Evolutionary Explanations of Emotions," *Human Nature* 1, no. 3 (1990): 261–89.

[212] Jennifer L. Goetz, Dacher Keltner and Emiliana Simon-Thomas, "Compassion: An Evolutionary Analysis and Empirical Review," *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 3 (2010): 354-355.

[213] Ibid, 355.

[214] Ibid.

collective action.[215] This emotional basis for a caring behaviour is, however, very different from the feeling of pity, which is associated with being concerned about someone deemed inferior.[216]

There is, thus, a close link between altruism and the emotion of compassion, contrary to Singer's account on effective altruism, whereby the very effectiveness is promoted through the disregard of such an emotional component. Such rationalistic accounts, as we have seen, facilitate the exclusion of a representation of a concrete concern for nature and all its living beings, for they focus exclusively on the logic and rational adherence to systems of thought and conduct. Although I do not aim to defend an evolutionary theory of compassion, as that would fall outside of the scope of this thesis, I do believe analyses such as Nesse's convincingly explain us how emotional traits like compassion are closely linked, in our societies, to normative values and moral conduct. What I find relevant about this aspect, thus, is that it draws attention to the emotional component in our moral systems of beliefs and rules. Although authors like Nesse focus on human-human relationships, I would still argue a link with nature can be made here. Let us look closer into this.

3.2.1 - Structures of feeling

Mick Smith, along the lines of eco-phenomenology, provides us with an interesting account of political expression and its impact on moral action. The author explains how our communities build *"patterns of emotionally mediated responses"*,[217] and that this is ultimately what grounds ethical experience.[218] One important evidence for this, evolutionary analyses explain, is how emotions such as compassion truly work along the lines of moral intuition of what is good and bad, right and wrong. These intuitive moral judgments are what grounds ethical theory.[219] There seems to be no reason, in my view, why these moral intuitions could not be applied to a concern for the environment. Most people, I would say, intuitively feel outraged upon witnessing acts of violence towards, for instance, dogs. Whereas this, at first glance, tells us very little about someone's relationship with nature, it does tell us something about what the general understanding

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[215] Ibid, 361.
[216] Ibid, 352.
[217] Smith, "Citizens, Denizens and the Res Publica," 145.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Goetz, Keltner and Simon-Thomas, "Compassion: An Evolutionary Analysis," 366.

of *"the appropriate structure of values"*[220] with regards to dogs is. The main point is, thus, to stress how these *"patterns of emotionally mediated responses"*[221] can be shaped by, and result from, institutional attitudes. What matters here, in this sense, is to understand that if the expressive dimension of institutional action has an impact on one's relationship towards dogs, as well as other people, it also has on our relationship with the environment. This does not require any sense of compassionate reciprocity between humans and non-human animals or other beings (I am not seeking to build a system of cooperation between humans and nature), but merely a one-sided institutional and expressive endeavour that works to guide individual and collective action.

Environmental ethics, in this sense, is ultimately concerned with what moral agents feel about nature and what kind of structural emotions moral communities ought to build in response to all-pressing issues about the natural environment and its living beings. The way we feel about nature and the way we feel compelled to act towards it is at the root of the solution of our moral actions with regards to nature. In fact, as Smith argues, one cannot truly engage in any ethical discussion unless one recognizes feeling something, and therefore caring.[222] When we talk about caring for something, we inevitably talk about our experience and emotions towards that same thing. This is, thus, at the basis of ethical relationships in a practical sense. Although rationalistic accounts of objective, intrinsic values do provide us with specific value-based orientations, an ethical framework with regards to humans' relationship with nature that is concerned with the kind of expressive attitudes and emotive responses towards nature seems valuable for it intends to stress the concrete applicability in institutions and politics.[223] Compassion, understood as an emotional trait that shapes our moral intuitions, actions, and relationships, can be a very applicable tool with regards to the current environmental crisis.

An expressive attitude coming from institutional action does not simply mean expressing some kind of sentiment-based attachment to all beings. In fact, as Singer explains in his work, one often struggles to even have direct feelings of compassion or altruism for strangers or for more than a certain number of people outside our family circles,[224] let alone the whole environment. However, what an expressive dimension in institutional action draws attention to is not subjective

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[220] Voigt, "Relational Equality," 447.
[221] Smith, "Citizens, Denizens and the Res Publica," 145.
[222] Smith, "Citizens, Denizens and the Res Publica", 150.
[223] Ibid, 148.
[224] Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, 76-7.

feelings, but rather the association between certain attitudes and actions with the construction of certain collective feelings — with building patterns of emotions that translate in the public space, discourse, and imaginations and become visible in moral action. It stresses the relevance of caring for nature in the form of a collective understanding of our position in the environment. These patterns are what Smith calls 'structures of feeling' which, in his words, *"might be thought of in terms of shared patterns of overlapping emotional responses that inform the practical cultural, aesthetic and ethical consciousness of certain groups in ways that facilitate common understandings."*[225]

3.2.2 - Fostering a compassionate behaviour

Examples of such expressive approaches are now being put into practice within several spheres of environmental action. In terms of advocacy, a number of environmental associations, NGOs, and political parties around the world, concerned with raising awareness, calling out corporate behaviours, or pushing forward climate policies, have given primary attention to the way nature and non-human animals are portrayed, the way the public perceives species-extinction, deforestation, or biodiversity loss, and the kind of treatment towards all these pressing issues is expressed by both individuals and collectives. These strategies firstly became more common amongst a range of social movements, such as the fight for civil, women, gay, disabled, and indigenous people's rights. These are now being used in several contexts, such as advocacy for animal welfare or against deforestation, which usually offer appeals to human-animal similarities, or to human-nature dependency, which has proven to influence the feelings for ecological justice.[226] A sort of collective compassion blossoms into the hearts of individuals, and eventually law-makers, through a mechanism of perspective-taking;[227] this involves not only being led to thinking about and imagining how it must be like to be the other (e.g. the animal whose habitat is now in degradation), but, more importantly, it leads people to intuitively recognize a moral concern. Political institutions specifically, then, carry the task of legislating and codifying such

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[225] Smith, "Citizens, Denizens and the Res Publica," 150.
[226] Verónica Sevillano, Juan Aragonés and P. Wesley Schultz, "Perspective Taking, Environmental Concern, and the Moderating Role of Dispositional Empathy," *Environment and Behavior* 39, no. 5 (2007): 687.
[227] Ibid, 687–88.

moral concern. But even prior to law-making is the collective effort of institutions, such as the education system, in expressing something that reaches the experiences of individuals and helps build a certain public understanding.

In the same way, conservation practitioners and land managers have also recognized the importance of a compassionate ethic in their practices, one that brings this structure of feeling into decision-making.[228] This has allowed not only to frame and shape the kind of solutions sought for the conflicts between humans and non-humans,[229] but also to influence the perception local communities have towards their natural surroundings, and whose mental constructions around nature are usually affected by such decisions. Rather than focusing simply on a rights position, their actions have transmitted an overarching message of, first and foremost, avoiding harm.[230] This fosters the sentiment of a shared community between humans, other animal species, plants, and entire ecosystems.

This being said, I believe creating, within an institutional framework, empathic mechanisms that foster a compassionate behaviour can form a valuable account that is more concrete and applicable than the previously presented approaches. Institutions, more so than individuals' rational commitments alone, ought to promote and express compassionate attitudes that help communities develop and exercise a sense of ecological urgency and obligation, one that can help fundamentally shape humans' relationship with nature. Institutions, by working to take care of biodiversity within cities and the countryside, fight back the interests of exploitative companies, protect the rights of indigenous peoples and the lives of animals inhabiting forests, and alongside this promote a political and educational discourse that goes in line with stressing human-nature dependence and organic mutualities (and the importance of being aware of this), are better apt to inspire moral action and, thereby, a healthier and more sustainable moral relationship with nature.

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[228] Daniel Ramp and Marc Bekoff, "Compassion as a Practical and Evolved Ethic for Conservation," in *Animal Ethics in the Age of Humans: Blurring Boundaries in Human-Animal Relationships*. The International Library of Environmental, Agricultural and Food Ethics, vol. 23, ed. Bernice Bovenkerk and Jozef Keulartz (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 387-96.
[229] Ibid, 387.
[230] Ibid, 391.

3.2.3 - Conclusion

I believe this account translates into practice most of eco-phenomenology's offerings for human-nature moral relationships. It manages to incorporate the experience of and emotions around the environment, not just present in institutional attitudes, but also in the way individuals perceive and experience the institutional treatment of the environment and its living members, and together form a collective understanding of their position in nature. This account explains, just like eco-phenomenology does, how there are indeed valuable reasons to understand emotions as not merely subjective and unstable, but as necessary components of any ethical experience and interpretation.

However, as seen above, this account is not in any way an appeal to reject reason. That would, indeed, be nonsensical. In fact, institutional *intentions* behind actions can very well be, most of the time, entirely rational. The institutional work this account appeals to will always have to be based on systems of rules and rational commitments. This institutional framework sees compassionate treatment (induced by institutions) as a form of reasoning that involves and results in thoughts and belief-systems.[231] Consequently, it evokes responses and forms an important basis for ethical experience and interpretation: it becomes a structural feeling. Compassion, thus understood as a structure of feeling, is a relevant part of moral deliberation, which is in itself embedded with reason.

In this sense, an anthropocentrism that stresses the importance of people's understanding of their experiences in and with nature and gives use to an institutional work of expressing compassionate attitudes towards nature seems to me promising in making people compelled to feel the desire to treat nature accordingly. This institutional work should not be based on intellectual endeavours that dictate how moral agents should feel about non-human beings, but rather be a continuous work on the expressive dimension of collective and individual action in order to build structures of feeling based on a sense of compassionate kinship.

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[231] Martha Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13, no. 1 (1996): 31.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to provide a more practical and political account for human-nature moral relationships. My explorations, however, were not driven by a normative standard of pragmatism per se. On the contrary, I wanted to find a framework that could also work on a theoretical basis, specifically with regards to the ontological human-nature dualism.

For this reason, I started with a brief examination of the problem of Cartesian dualism, in order to understand the motivations behind the widely common approach in animal and nature ethics: ethical extensionism. Subsequently, I provided an overview and critical analysis of three forms of extensionism: Singer's sentientism, Taylor's biocentrism, and Callicot's ecocentrism. All these theories have shown to maintain a form of human-nature dualism, which lies at the basis of ecological degradation, by relying too heavily on moral abstracts and purely rational, moral commitments. This entails a rejection of human experiences and feelings regarding the natural environment. Furthermore, the three theories place a faulty focus on rejecting anthropocentrism, which is not only not accomplished, I argued, but actually impossible. The overall, theoretical problem concerns, thus, the very foundation that drives the extensionist framework: caring for nature in the sense of being guided by any emotional empathy is not only not required, according to these authors, but also vehemently denied moral significance, which offers reason and rationality a crucial and ultimate role and which is expressed in the attempt to reject anthropocentrism.

In chapter 2, I analysed an eco-phenomenological perspective that focuses exactly on what extensionism overlooks, making clearer the importance of humans' first-person experiences in and with nature, in order to understand our place and role in the natural world. This was done through an elaboration on Brown's phenomenological approach to emotive responses in our experiences with nature and Acampora's theory of corporal compassion. I argued that, although this framework does place a relevant role in human experiences and emotions (one that stresses human-nature mutualities, not separation), solving the ontological dualism, it can risk being too vague and impractical. Nonetheless, I defended the role of compassion offered by eco-phenomenology as an emotive response closely linked to moral action.

Finally, taking into account these theoretical analyses, and in light of seeking a more practical and political framework for human-nature moral relationships, I have, in chapter 3,

sought to provide an in-between position. Focusing on Schemmel's theory of relational egalitarianism, I drew a parallel with human-nature relationships and argued that compassion need not be used in a purely abstract, phenomenological way (one that simply assumes that moral agents will develop this emotive response in their engagement with nature), but instead should be a continuous, political and institutional exercise. This translates into an institutional work embedded with reason and rational commitments, but also one that expresses and engages in compassionate attitudes towards all living beings, helping individuals and collectives form a public understanding of their place on earth and the urgency of engaging with nature with acts of care. In this sense, the role of compassion is twofold: it should be an institutional attitude and, consequently, form a structure of feeling. Such a structure makes us engage in moral deliberations and actions, not simply out of an understanding of ethical principles or any moral abstract as such, but out of a collective understanding of mutualities, of what humans and non-humans share, of their vulnerabilities. This constitutes, therefore, more than a purely rational commitment or recognition of one's moral duties, but the basis of an ethical sensibility shared by individuals and fed by institutional work.

Throughout this thesis, I have hopefully shown how compassion can offer a more practical account for our moral relationship with the natural environment, one which assumes the urgency of dealing with the current ecological crisis. My focus on compassion, as opposed to any other emotion or attitude (e.g. love, responsibility, worry), was mainly motivated by its double function. As argued above, compassion entails not only the distress or empathy upon the other's situation, but it is coupled with the urge to act upon it. Compassion, in this sense, is both emotion and intentional attitude, ethical feeling and moral action. It takes place in a dialogue with the environment and all its objects of care, encompassing the subject's perspective and her commitments towards nature. It provides, I argued, a sound basis for selves-in-relation and a plausible tool for institutional work.

Little research has been done on the link between the expressive dimension of institutional work and state action and environmental ethics. Although this might be an idea still much in need of further research, I urge the reader to consider the importance of an emotionful account for human-nature relationships, one that truly seeks to compel moral agents to engage with nature in a compassionate way, more so than dictating what ought to be done — which has yet to prove visible results. Societies built around an understanding of humans as beings who share corporal

mutualities with other living forms might be useful in bringing people closer to nature and, therefore, to the urgency of the current situation.

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