Matter Matters:

On Our Moral Relationship with the Inanimate World

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"Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant"
Theodor W. Adorno

This thesis, I now realize, has been percolating in my mind since 2016, when I was lucky enough to travel through South America, on my own, for eight wonderful months. While there I got the sense that I was in a different world; that the people I met were operating from a different conception of reality than my own. I made many incredible friends and acquaintances who invited me into their lives with much warmth, love, and enthusiasm. They were vibrant manifestations of the different worldview I struggled to put my finger on. They taught me many things. One was that, stuck in one particular paradigm, one struggles to comprehend the depth of alternative worldviews' implications for the way on exists in the world. I am struggling, as I write this, to put into words what the differences in outlook were. They could be subtle or glaring; sometimes obvious, sometimes almost imperceptible. Clear but indescribable. Expressed in offhand comments, in conduct, in culture. It was the smell of the air, the color of the light. It is one thing to know or hear of other cultures, but to experience a different worldview for oneself is quite another. In any event, the friends I made and experiences we shared showed me a way of living and thinking I had not yet experienced. I am grateful to all of them, and to my dear friend Macarena Zapata in particular, whose personal philosophy is best summed up by something she once wrote to me: "amor y naturaleza sobre todo."

Returning to the Netherlands was difficult. Enveloped in the Western world, living below sea level, I could no longer see the world I had left behind. It had disappeared over the horizon, and I was left with a sense of profound alienation from the spaces I from nature and from life. If this sounds dramatic, it's because to my 19-year-old self it really was. I struggled to find the words to justify my discontent. At university, engaging in the standard debates of the Western canon, I often felt something was missing; as though someone had said something important at the start, but the discussion had moved on before it was addressed. Kant, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Rawls….. rationality, agency, interests, humans….. Slowly, however, the language I needed trickled in. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Chris Ranalli for the excellent

ABSTRACT

This thesis asks how we should understand our moral relationship with inanimate matter. It argues that the philosophical history of Western modernity has led us to endorse an ontological framework which harbors problematic commitments to (Cartesian) dualism. It implicates this dominant dualist ontology in the current ecological crisis, and connects it to the subjugation of matter, which traditional ethics considers morally insignificant. The thesis first explains current standard views on the moral status of inanimate objects. Thereafter it outlines the history of the Western philosophical paradigm, demonstrates how the standard (environmental) ethical approaches are founded on problematic dualisms, and argues that Western commitments to dualism should be reconsidered. It analyzes the potential of commonly discussed alternatives to the standard ethical approaches, concludes that they fail to fully reject problematic dualisms, and argues that insights from 'new' materialist, ecofeminist, and Indigenous scholarship offer alternative ontological approaches which might help us reimagine inanimate matter as morally considerable. Finally, it discusses how these insights might change our understanding of the moral dimensions of a particular case study.

Key words: Inanimate objects, environmental ethics, ontological dualism, new materialism, Indigenous materialisms.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the question how we should understand our moral relationship with inanimate objects, or, more generally, *matter*. In discussing this question, I will elaborate on three general claims. First I aim to show how ontological frameworks underlying traditional Western environmental ethical approaches render them unable to extend moral consideration to inanimate matter. Second, I will argue that our current ecological problems can be understood as being grounded, in part, in our moral attitudes towards matter and inanimate objects. Third, I will argue that standard Western ontological assumptions regarding matter require critical re-examination, and that new materialist, ecofeminist, Indigenous scholarship offer important insights into possible alternative approaches.

One might wonder what the ecological crisis has to do with ontology, matter, and inanimate objects, and why we should care about the inanimate at all. After all, the consensus in Western philosophy is that inanimate objects are not moral subjects because they are neither alive nor sentient (Warren, 1997). This position seems self-evident; they cannot experience harm, so how could we argue that inanimate objects deserve moral consideration, and why would we want to? The following introduction will briefly outline the context of this question, explain why it is important, and outline the structure this thesis will follow.

We find ourselves in a global ecological crisis of unprecedented proportions, which is directly attributable to ecologically disastrous human interactions with the world (IPCC, 2022). These interactions have been shaped by various social, political, intellectual, and economic processes associated with Western modernity (Reddekop, 2014; Kureethadam 2017), all of which "reflect and manifest… a particular, dominant, Western philosophical heritage as their immanent logic" (Reddekop, 2014, p. 2). The modern Western paradigm has a number of interesting aspects, but its commitments to Cartesian dualism in particular have been linked by numerous theorists to humans' contentious relationship with the natural environment (Kureethadam, 2017; Reddekop 2014; Asch 2009; Plumwood 1994 & 1991; Mathews 2017; Conty, 2018). Joshtrom Kureethadam (2017) has argued that Descartes' ontological dualism, which starkly separates the rational, exclusively human mind from spatially extended matter, is particularly responsible for the creation of a modern worldview which sees humans as superior to the 'merely' material world. To this metaphysical step he attributes the development of a rationalistic conception of humans which has historically lent

itself to a notion of human exceptionalism, laying the foundation for ecologically disastrous human-nature relations characterized by an exploitative and dominating approach to nature. Here the link between ontology and ethics becomes clear. Descartes' theoretical steps created the basic ontological framework within which human self-perception and human-nature relations are conceived and grounded. It is also within this framework, and on the basis of these basic concepts, that environmental ethical theories are conceived. Our view of the world shapes the way we interact with it.

The view that Cartesian dualism fundamentally influenced current human attitudes towards nature is supported by ecofeminists like Val Plumwood (1994) and Freya Mathews (2017) whose work implicates dualism in the 'twin' domination of women and nature, and by critical theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) who have argued that the domination of nature is fundamental to the logic of domination more generally. Their work links the dualist schema, of which mind/matter dualism is a core feature, to various interlinked systems of social, political, and discursive power. The connection between ontological dualism, the ecological crisis, and inanimate matter becomes clearer when one considers the difficulties traditional environmental ethical approaches face when trying to articulate moral imperatives for treating the non-human world with moral consideration. Since these theories are grounded in an ontological understanding of most of the non-human world as inanimate and fundamentally lacking agency, mind, or life, it is impossible to imagine that acting upon such inert, passive matter could be anything but morally neutral. Although this seems perfectly coherent within the established logical and ontological frameworks of modern Western thought, the aforementioned theorists' work nevertheless suggests that the frameworks within which these difficulties arise are grounded in conceptual and normative choices that were made within a particular philosophical and historical context, and that these choices can be critiqued. Simply put: the way we conceive of matter affects the way we relate to our natural environment. Thus the ecological crisis can be understood as related, at least in part, to our attitudes towards the inanimate. I therefore suggest that if we are to change the way we, as humans, relate to the natural world, we need to revise our ontological understanding of matter and of ourselves.

Traditional ethical theories in the Western tradition, namely individualist utilitarian or deontological theories, have traditionally focused manly on intra-human interactions. The question of the independent moral standing of inanimate objects and matter itself rarely comes

up, unless one speaks of particular artifactual objects of cultural or aesthetic significance to humans, for example. In environmental ethics, however, the question of the inanimate tends to arise with more frequency, given the reliance of living beings on the inanimate and material elements of the natural environment. Although there have been attempts within Western environmental ethics to make sense of the moral importance of inanimate elements of ecosystems (Naess, 1984; Rolston, 1988), at least insofar as beings which we do generally take to have moral standing depend on them, my claim is that these approaches are nevertheless grounded in an ontological framework which conceives of matter in a way which make it difficult to conceive of them as mattering for their own sake. Thus, although some traditional approaches have tried to dispose of dualism and conceive of ways to extend moral consideration to the inanimate elements of the natural world, they are nevertheless grounded in the same ontological framework which subjugated inanimate matter in the first place. As such, while some approaches do have potential for extending moral consideration to the natural world, a number of theorists, including ecofeminists, 'new' materialists, and Indigenous scholars, propose critiques and alternative (ontological) viewpoints which could carry those efforts further. This thesis will explore the strategies which these alternative views provide for conceiving of matter as a morally considerable interlocutor.

This topic is socially significant because if it is indeed the case that our attitudes towards the inanimate negatively affect our way of relating to the world around us, re-evaluating the way we relate to the inanimate and the ontological framework which grounds our attitudes may enable us to develop more ecologically sound behaviors. Academically, the question is significant because, as aforementioned, matter's lack of inherent moral standing is often taken for granted, and because the ontological foundations of this belief are rarely examined. When one encounters theoretical quandaries within a particular theoretical paradigm, one naturally seeks resolutions within the established logical framework. I suggest, however, that the resolution may lie in the foundations underlying traditional theoretical approaches. If the ontological assumptions which shape our moral theories indeed lead us to misguided and destructive ecological behaviors, examining them is a matter of great importance.

My research question, how we should understand our moral relationship with inanimate matter, can be understood as consisting of three sub-questions. Namely, whether our ontological assumptions currently limit our ability to conceive of the inanimate as

possessing moral status, whether this is problematic, and whether alternative ontological or theoretical choices may enable us to do so instead. My hypothesis is that each of these sub-questions can be answered affirmatively.

I will make the following four arguments. First, traditional Western environmental ethical theories reflect the normative and ontological dualism of the Western philosophical paradigm. This has influenced their approach to inanimate matter. Second, these dualist commitments have troubling normative implications, and revising them may provide us with more coherent theoretical paths to justifying moral consideration of inanimate matter. Third, common alternatives to the traditional views of moral status, like holist views and deep ecology, challenge some of the traditional theories' main assumptions. Nevertheless, they fail to provide adequate grounds for moral consideration of inanimate objects because they do not fully reject dualism. Fourth and finally, ecofeminist, new materialist, and Indigenous scholarship can offer fruitful insights which might carry their efforts further.

The structure of this thesis is as follows. Chapter 1 outlines current mainstream views on moral status and inanimate objects. Chapter 2 draws on Joshtrom Kureethadam's (2017) analysis of Descartes' influence on modern Western philosophy in order to outline and problematize Cartesian ontological dualism. It also discusses how Cartesian ontological dualism has coalesced with a broader normative dualist framework, and argues that the traditional views outlines in Chapter 1 are based in these dualist frameworks. Chapter 3 discusses whether commonly offered alternatives to the traditional views presented in Chapter 1, namely holist views and deep ecology, are able to accommodate moral consideration of inanimate objects, and whether they sufficiently respond to the critiques discussed in Chapter 2. I will argue that these alternatives are insufficient, and argue that an alternative *ontological* framework is necessary, and that this should be supplemented with insights from ecofeminist and Indigenous scholarship. Chapter 4 will outline the contours of an alternative ontological approach supported by ecofeminist and Indigenous theory. Chapter 5 will discuss how these insights may enrich our understanding of the moral contours of a particular case study, namely the destruction of Juukan Gorge in Pilbara, Australia by mining giant Rio Tinto. Finally, in my conclusion I summarize my arguments and identify fruitful areas for future research.

Chapter 1: Current Views on Inanimate Objects

This chapter reviews traditional theories of moral status in Western (environmental) ethics, and discusses their positions on the moral status of inanimate objects and matter. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight that traditional moral theories, despite their relative diversity, do not provide much room to incorporate inanimate objects into the sphere of moral consideration. In Chapter 2, I start to clarify the philosophical background of these positions and the ontological assumptions underlying our disregard for the moral status of the inanimate, as well as introduce some critiques of these ontological choices.

§1.1 - The Standard View(s) of Moral Status

Traditional ethical theories do not provide room for moral consideration of inanimate objects. The consensus in Western moral philosophy is that inanimate objects do not have moral status (Warren, 1997). It makes little sense to most Westerners to say that one has morally wronged a stone by kicking it, or that one ought to treat the stapler on one's desk with respect. Such demands give rise to numerous questions: Why *should* we respect gravel, staplers, rocks, and what would that even require? How could one wrong an object if it cannot feel pain? One can have moral obligations *with regards to* inanimate objects, by virtue of their relation to someone or something possessing moral status, but not directly to inanimate objects themselves.

Traditional ethical theories were 'designed' with human beings in mind, with the objective of prescribing moral rules for interaction between individual human beings (Santas, 1999). When the question of animal rights and moral obligations to other nonhuman entities arises, a common approach thus involves expanding extant anthropocentric moral theories to include nonhumans as well. Traditional attempts to extend moral consideration to nonhuman animals and the environment thus tend to involve identifying the characteristics that make human beings morally important and subsequently identifying which other entities fulfill the necessary and sufficient criteria. In other words, they involve identifying the features which render nonhuman beings sufficiently morally similar to human beings. Traditional views also tend to be individualist - the central locus of moral concern is the individual, as opposed to the 'whole', community, or society the individual is part of. They are also individualist in another

way. Since attempts to identify criteria for moral considerability tend to involve identifying morally relevant characteristics universally possessed by human beings and other bearers of moral status, traditional ethical theories tend to be individualist in the sense that they are implicitly predicated upon an underlying ontological understanding of individuals as discrete, constant, ready-made entities (Ibid.). The "problem of ethics" is thus taken to "consist primarily in getting these disparate entities to consider the interests of one another" (Ibid., p. 9). Of course, there are also holistic environmental ethical views, which are more concerned with 'wholes' like (biotic) communities or ecosystems than with their individual members. Their capacity to extend moral consideration to inanimate objects will be discussed in Chapter 3, once individualist views have been discussed. Both holist and individualist views, however, are individualist in the latter sense just described, in that they subscribe to a kind of *ontological* individualism, which will be discussed in greater detail in the second, third, and fourth chapters.

According to Palmer (2005), individualist theories can be roughly divided along three major axes: (1) Consequentialist/deontological views, which represent the two most influential schools of moral theories, (2) sentience/life-based views, and (3) egalitarian/ hierarchical views. The following paragraphs will briefly summarize these axes. Consequentialist views are mainly concerned with maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain across all members of a group of morally considerable entities, or with maximizing preference satisfaction. Deontological views are concerned with ensuring that beings with moral status are treated not as means but as ends in themselves, regardless of consequences. Both schools of thought require that moral subjects have interests. For consequentialists, interest are what make harm and benefit (or pleasure and pain, utility and disutility) possible, whereas for deontologists possession of interests is a component of being intrinsically deserving of moral consideration, because possessing them makes one the "subject-of-a-life", as put by Tom Regan (1984, p. 244), and thus a being that deserves to be treated as important for its own sake. Thus arises the question, what are the necessary conditions for the possession of interests?

Here the second axis arises; the distinction between sentience-based and life-based views. Sentience-based views hold that the ability to have positive and negative experience of pleasure and pain, for example, is a necessary condition for the possession of interests, or ends that can be thwarted. On these views, sentience is a necessary condition for the

possession of interests, and thus for moral considerability, and insentient beings cannot have real interests since they lack perception of positive and negative experiences. An example of a sentience-based view is Peter Singer's, who believes that "*pain* and *suffering* are bad and should be minimized irrespective of the race, sex, or species of the being that suffers" (1979, p. 54, emphasis added). If a being cannot experience pain or suffering, then one's treatment of it cannot be judged as objectionable. Others propose that sentience is unnecessary for the possession of interests because all living things, even the insentient, have an interest in survival regardless of whether they are *aware* of this interest, or *consciously* devote their efforts to survival (Verhoog & Visser, 1997). An influential theory in this vein is Paul Taylor's (2011), whose deontological and Aristotelian view bases inherent worth on the condition of being a teleological center of life (Paske, 1989). On his view, all living organisms pursue their own survival, wellbeing, and other ends, and thus have interests in a morally relevant sense whether or not they are sentient or conscious of them.

Finally, views can be hierarchical or egalitarian. Hierarchical accounts hold that beyond the baseline criteria for moral status, certain additional characteristics can make one entity's interests weigh more heavily than another's, should their interests come to conflict. Egalitarian views, on the other hand, hold that the interests of beings which reach the minimal threshold for moral consideration have equal weight. This distinction can lead to hierarchical and egalitarian views prescribing different weighing of entities' interests, and thus favoring different outcomes in the event of conflicts of moral status holders' interests.

Despite their differences, none of these traditional Western approaches enable the extension of moral consideration to, or the possession of moral status by, the inanimate. This is because their fundamental logic is that for a being to matter for its own sake, a notion which is tied to our definition of moral status, it must have a sake of its own in the first place. That is, it must have interests, for which it must, at minimum, be alive. Since moral status is tied to the possession of interests, and thus minimally to the condition of life, inanimate objects and matter itself do not stand a chance.

One might contend, however, that traditional theories *do* make room for moral consideration of some types of inanimate objects. It is not uncommon for people to insist that objects of great aesthetic, cultural, or historic value are treated with respect. A recent example of this was the global outrage at two climate activists throwing a can of soup at a Van Gogh painting, and gluing themselves to the wall beneath it (Gayle, 2022). Had the painting actually

been damaged, which is what not because it was behind protective glass, it would have been seen as an affront not only to the late artist himself, but also to the entirety of humanity whose cultural and artistic patrimony the painting is part of. However, this moral outrage does not reflect concern for the rights of the painting itself - it has only indirect moral status, derived from moral obligations towards moral status holders with a particular relationship to the object.

This distinction between direct and indirect moral worth can also be described in terms of the different kinds of value-concepts outlined by Paul Taylor (2011), who distinguishes between inherent worth, inherent value, and intrinsic value. Inherent worth is defined by Taylor as something an entity X possesses "*if a state of affairs in which the good of X is realized is better than an otherwise similar state of affairs in which it is not realized… (a) independently of X's being valued, either intrinsically or instrumentally, by some human values, and (b) independently of X's being in fact useful in furthering the ends of a conscious being or in furthering the realization of some other being's good*" (Taylor, 2011, p. 75). This is contrasted with *intrinsic value*, possessed by things or events when they are valued, by humans or other conscious beings, because they experience it as enjoyable, and value it *because* of its enjoyableness. The pursuit of a postgraduate degree might, for example, be intrinsically valuable to a student; regardless of the instrumental value of obtaining it, the student may find the very experience of studying a degree an enjoyable and satisfying end in itself. To this student, the postgraduate degree has both instrumental and intrinsic value. It is also contrasted with *inherent value,* possessed by things that are valuable not instrumentally or commercially, but because they are beautiful, or of personal, historic or cultural importance.

The latter kinds of value both depend on an object's being valued by a person or conscious being. That is, things are *endowed* with such value, and it is thus "not "inherent" in the sense of belonging to them independently of how they happen to be valued by other people" (Ibid., p. 74). Using these terms, then, we can establish that we attribute to the Van Gogh painting *intrinsic* and *inherent value,* but not *inherent worth,* because it does not have a good or ends of its own that can be furthered or thwarted. It ought to be treated with care or respect not for its own sake, but for the sakes of beings that value it. These sources of value are purely anthropocentric, and inanimate objects and matter itself cannot be understood as having inherent worth of the kind which confers the type of moral importance which

traditional views are concerned with. Ultimately, the term *inherent worth* refers to a thing's being an end in itself, while the latter two kinds of value refer to the value possessed by things that are means to an end. The notion of moral status employed by the traditional, individualist theories described above is related to the notion of *inherent worth,* and not the latter value concepts. Traditional, individualist theories of moral status may take inanimate objects and matter to possess the latter two kinds of value, but they do not satisfy the central criterion for inherent worth, which can be possessed "only by things that have a good of their own" (Ibid., p. 75). Although Taylor's use of these terms is not uniformly applied throughout philosophical literature - inherent worth is sometimes referred to by others as intrinsic worth or value, for example - I will be adopting Taylor's use of the terms throughout this thesis for clarity.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight that despite the apparent divergence of the views described above, they are fundamentally similar. As we have seen, the Western mainstream does offer a number of different views. In terms of their practical consequences the views described above are worlds apart; *within* their shared frame of reference, Singer and Taylor's views could not be more different. Nevertheless, they still orbit the same fundamental conception of potential moral subjects: individual living beings with interests that can flourish. Taylor's view is perhaps the most radically inclusive of the individualist views, but his main concern is still the is 'widening' of the moral circle, and he therefore still functions around the same core as Singer, Regan, and the rest. None of the aforementioned views enable direct moral consideration of inanimate objects and life is, for all of them, a baseline requirement for moral status.

These traditional views may appear unremarkable, in that their lack of concern for inanimate objects appears logical and self-evident. Indeed, if an object is not alive and cannot be harmed in a way that matters to it, why should it be treated with concern and what would that mean anyway? To clarify why this may be problematic, it is important first to understand the philosophical background of the ontological assumptions and premises underlying their disregard for inanimate matter. This is important because our ontological assumptions inform our conception of human identity, and what we think makes humans, and beings sufficiently similar to them, morally important. As aforementioned, these ontological foundations have been implicated in the domination of nature, and in various other interrelated relationships of hierarchy, domination, and oppression. The next chapter provides some context for our ontological choices, and their link to domination of nature.

Chapter 2: Modernity and Dualism

This chapter outlines the ontological and normative dualist frameworks which, I argue, underlie the ethical theories described in Chapter 1. My characterization of Cartesian substance dualism follows Kureethadam's analysis thereof, presented in his book 'The Philosophical Roots of the Ecological Crisis' (2017). The relevance of views on the moral status of inanimate objects to the ecological crisis and human-nature relations is also discussed. Three features of Western philosophical thought are highlighted: (1) Human-nature relations are viewed as dualistic, (2) normative dualism lends itself to hierarchical relationships between dualised terms, and (3) Western thought places primacy on individuals, rather than wholes or relationally interlinked entities.

§ 2.1 - On Cartesian Ontological Dualism

The European Enlightenment is widely considered the catalyst for the onset of 'modernity,' the current intellectual and cultural epoch of human history. Of the Enlightenment's thinkers, Rene Descartes was particularly influential. Often dubbed the 'father of modern philosophy,' his philosophical contributions defined central debates in modern epistemology and ontology. In 'The Philosophical Roots of the Ecological Crisis' (2017), Kureethadam identifies Descartes' philosophical legacy as having borne "the triple foundations of the Modern worldview - in terms of its exaggerated anthropocentrism, a mechanistic conception of the natural world, and the metaphysical dualism between humanity and the rest of the physical world" (p. 5). He furthermore claims that these characteristics have directly influenced human-nature relations. Insofar as Descartes' work was foundational to the modern Western ontological framework, his ontological dualism also underlies modern (environmental) ethics.

Cartesian dualism refers to Descartes' substance dualism: the thesis that there are two distinct kinds of substance or foundation: non-physical and non-spatial mind, which is identified with consciousness and whose essence is thinking, and spatially extended physical matter, whose essence is extension (Robinson, 2023). Descartes' dualism greatly influenced the modern debate about the mind-body problem; the question of the relationship between the mind, and the brain and body (Ibid.). However, although his work is often discussed in terms of the mind-body problem, his thesis extends to a broader ontological dualism. On the one

hand, Cartesian dualism is "the thesis that man is a compound of two distinct substances - *res cogitans*, unextended thinking substance, or mind, and *res extensa*, extended corporeal substance, or body" (Cottingham, 1986, p. 119). But *res extensa* also encompasses the rest of the physical world beyond human beings and any other mind-possessing beings. The mind/body split is part of a greater mind/matter dualism.

Descartes likely did not set out to establish a normative hierarchy between mind and matter or humans and nature. Nevertheless, an exaggerated anthropocentrism and a mechanistic view of the physical world, both of which have lent themselves to the ecological crisis, are part of his work's legacy (Robinson, 2023; Kureethadam, 2017. To see how this came to be we must understand Descartes' definition of human identity and his epistemological strategy.

On a metaphysical level, Descartes understands the identity of the human self as *res cogitans.* That is, the self, the human essence or soul, "gets reduced to sole rationality, and rationality itself is further trimmed down to thinking or consciousness alone" (Kureethadam, 2017, p. 138).[1] Conscious thought thus becomes what is most essentially and authentically human, or what a human most essentially and authentically is. This is because the only thing one can know indubitably is that one is thinking, and thus that one is, most fundamentally, a thinking thing; the self is identified with the incorporeal mental substance. The rest of the physical world, including our bodies, is considered mere *res extensa* (Kureethadam, 2017, p. 5). The mind is pure intellect, the body pure extension. Man is defined by his rational mind alone, and he is alone in being this. This lends itself to the mechanistic worldview whereby matter is seen as completely devoid of mind, agency, and subjectivity. Since the mind is the exclusive domain of humanity, and matter is devoid of mind, the body and the physical world - all of non-human nature, including animate but insentient beings - become dead, passive, and inert, moved along only by external physical forces or by possessors of mind and agency.

Nature is reduced to the mechanistic, the inevitable, and it is here that the trouble of extending moral consideration to anything other than humans, be they animate or inanimate, commences. This clarifies why most efforts to do so have involved searching for mind-like qualities in other-than-human animals, leaving inanimate objects, and matter itself, in the dust. The mind is the thing that morally animates humanity, distinguishes it from the merely

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[1] Here we see a precursor to the normative dualism to be discussed in the following section: rationality is linked to the conscious, thinking mind. Emotions, linked to the body, are excluded from the realm of reason.

mechanistic physical world, and allows us to transcend mere corporeality. It is this rationalism, the identification of humans with the possession of a rational mind, which underlies a disregard for 'mere' matter.

The uniqueness of the human subject is further strengthened by Descartes' epistemology, which establishes the absolute "primacy of subjectivity" (Ibid., p. 127). Descartes defines man as the "absolute foundation for the representation of reality" (Ibid. p. 128) by first asserting that if one can know anything indubitably, it is that one is thinking, and so long one thinks, one exists. So long as one thinks, one knows that one is "a thinking thing." *Cogito, ergo sum* is thus the first epistemological principle: it is *the* fact which can be affirmed before any other, and thus affirms the subject as the anchor and foundation for all knowledge of the 'external' world. Any knowledge of the world is thus rendered representational; reality is ""represented" by the subject," thereby becoming like a picture, made possible "only because the human being has emerged as the subject" (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 132-134; qtd. Kureethadam, 2017, p. 135). In this representational epistemology the human subject objectifies all else - everything beyond humanity becomes a mere 'representation' of which humans are the masters and creators, and thus "things become "real" or "actual" insofar as they are "objectified" by the cognizing subject" (Zimmerman, 1990).

These ontological and epistemological moves also produce the ontological individualism mentioned in Chapter 1. This ontological individualism frames our understanding of moral subjects and agents as discrete, bounded individual entities possessed of particular properties, like rationality, free will, and subjectivity. These particular qualities, possessed in principle by all humans, are what allow them and only them to be moral persons in the fullest sense in, for example, hierarchical ethical theories. The Cartesian definition of humans as individual, rational beings who are the seat of knowledge of the external world can be contrasted with the starting point of *relational* ontological positions, which Reddekop (2014) describes as "beginning with the assumption that *relations* are prior, that any atomistic "thing" is rather only a kind of (at least temporary) fixity or concrescence, a gathering constituted in and through these prior, dynamic, and contextual relations" (p. 35). This individualism also underlies the dualistic distinction drawn between subjects and objects, both of which are seen as 'atomistic,' bounded individuals. Moreover, it underlies our very understanding of the world as constituted and inhabited by individual subjects and objects. We speak of inanimate objects and whether or not they universally possess qualities which might

afford them moral status. Underlying this language is an understanding of them as fixed entities which may interact but whose interactions are secondary to their existence, rather than seeing them as temporary coalescences of 'flows' of materials, fundamentally constituted by and through these constant flows. As will be discussed in following chapters, this ontological position influences both our understanding of human-nature relations, and of the moral position of the inanimate.

Of course, Descartes' substance dualism is not uncontested. Modern philosophy has seen a number of different ontological positions emerge, including a variety of monist positions and various different kinds of dualisms beyond Cartesian substance dualism (Robinson, 2023). One might therefore argue that the normative valuations of mind and matter associated with Cartesian thought are not universally accepted, since other theories have different upshots. If this is the case, one might wonder why we should take Cartesian dualism to underlie our environmental ethics and our current positions on the moral status of the inanimate. I argue that Cartesian dualism is nevertheless relevant not only because it fundamentally influenced and continues to ground the ontological debates that followed it, but also because Descartes' ontological dualism coalesced with a broader normative and symbolic dualist schema which organizes all manner of concepts and (ontological) categories in terms of which Western culture, and its moral theories, are conceived and articulated. Although it was not Descartes' intention, his ontological dualism is linked with this overarching cultural, symbolic, and normative dualist framework. It is in this normative dualism that our ontological dualism, our understanding of mind and matter as distinct substances, and our identification of our human selves with the former substance, meet our cultural imaginations and concept associations.

§2.2 - On Normative Dualism

Dualism in general refers to the notion that in "some particular domain, there are two fundamental kinds or categories of things or principles" (Robinson, 2023). Various dualisms have been identified by scholars across various fields. In Philosophy of Mind we see mind-body dualism, in Theology dualists may believe that Good and Evil are distinct forces (Ibid.), and feminists often take issue with the male/female dualism which underlies common views on the gender binary, for example (Plumwood, 2014; Mathews, 2017). Although these

dualisms are not *necessarily* associated with other dualist sets and can be discussed in their independent contexts, many of them are discursively and symbolically interconnected, acting within the cultural imagination like different threads of a single web of dualistic symbols and associations. What I have termed Normative Dualism can thus be understood as a conceptual framework which organizes categories and concepts fundamental to Western culture and imagination into a schema of dual, hierarchically-ordered opposites (Mathews, 2017). Some notable binaries, drawn from Mathews (2017, p. 57) and Plumwood (2014), include:

- Mind/Matter
- Culture/Nature
- Human/Nature
- Human/Animal
- Male/Female
- Reason/Emotion
- Rational/Irrational
- Thought/Feeling
- Soul/Body
- Public/Private
- Civilization/Savagery
- White people/BIPOC[2]
- Animate/Inanimate
- Conscious/Unconscious
- Abstract/Concrete
- Universal/Particular
- Subject/Object

In her book 'Feminism and the Mastery of Nature' (1994), ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood identifies a number of dynamics present in the dualist framework. The following summary has been drawn from Freya Mathews' (2017) comprehensive overview of Plumwood's work.

First and foremost, in the dualist framework terms are dichotomized and construed as hyper-separate opposites. Second, all the terms on one side of the binary are systemically associated with all the other terms on that side of the binary. One of the most recognizable examples of this is the gender binary, whose dual counterparts are commonly associated with

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[2] Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color

other sets of dual terms. Women have long been associated with nature, emotion, irrationality, animality, all which terms are contrasted with and subjugated to their dual counterparts: men, who are associated with culture, reason, rationality, and humanity. As put by Plumwood, whose concern was primarily to link the subjugation of nature to the oppression of women, "the terms on the higher, left-hand side of the binaries [are] systematically associated with, and [serve] to define, masculinity, while those on the lower, right-hand side [are] associated with, and [serve] to define, the feminine" (1994, qtd. Mathews, 2017, p. 57). Though Plumwood focuses on gender, this is not the only possible point of departure. Throughout the European colonial project of the 16th through 20th centuries, for example, colonized peoples were discursively linked with nature, savagery, irrationality, and animality (Roothaan, 2019).

This brings us to the third characteristic: the binaries are hierarchical. That is, all things on the left side of the binary are considered normatively superior to all terms on the right side. Mind is elevated above matter, reason above emotion, rationality above irrationality. This can be traced back to Descartes' ontological dualism: the former terms are associated with agency, the latter with passivity. Furthermore, given the second characteristic, *all* terms on the left side can potentially be construed as superior to *any* term on the right, which creates complex symbolic relationships between terms across different sets.

From here we can also identify a number of dynamics imposed upon the binaries' inferior terms: inferior categories can or tend to be (1) *backgrounded*, as when nature is construed as a mere backdrop for human life, (2) *instrumentalized*, as when women's efforts in the private sphere are taken to serve primarily to create the material conditions for men to make history through their participation in the public sphere; nature is taken to 'serve' primarily to provide resources for human purposes; or "the body is seen as a mere vessel for the mind" (Mathews, 2017, p. 58), (3) *incorporated* into superior terms, meaning that they are defined primarily in terms of their difference (or deficiency) relative to superior terms, as when animals are considered primarily in terms of their (dis)similarity to humans rather than their own "specific excellences" (Ibid.), and (4) *homogenized* relative to the superior term, in that they are lumped together, their diversity ignored, and defined en masse in opposition to the superior term. For example, Mathews points out that "all sentient life on the planet is lumped together under the category 'animals' in contradistinction to the category 'human', despite the fact that the human is in reality only one animal species among a staggeringly vast and various array of others" (Ibid.).

These characteristics of the normative dualist framework serve to reinforce relations of domination. Superior terms are afforded specificity, internality, prominence, and are posited as the 'standard,' whereas the inferior terms are homogenized, backgrounded, instrumentalized, and othered. Although these normative associations do not interfere with the facts that are available to us, for example, that humans are but one of many animals, or that rocks are but one of many different kinds of 'inanimate objects,' they nevertheless affect our way of thinking about and approaching these things. Since the hierarchical associations are interlinked and able to cross particular sets of dualised terms, this normative framework lends itself to diverse hierarchical relations. This sheds light on the dynamics underlying the claim, made by the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, that instrumentalized reason plays a critical role in "constructing a notion of nature as the ultimate object of domination" (Ibid.), and the further claim that "the domination of nature served as the ideological template for political domination generally" (Leiss 1972; qtd. Mathews, 2017, p. 55).

This claim also illustrates how cultural contexts coalesced with and influence ontology. Francis Bacon, who preceded the Enlightenment but greatly influenced it nevertheless, posited that knowledge obtained through systematic inquiry "would not only be exempt from the influence of wealth and power but would establish man as the master of nature" (qtd. Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 1). Dominion over nature through the application of knowledge was an ostensible objective of the Enlightenment project; when Bacon proclaimed that "now we govern nature in opinions, but we are thrall unto her in necessity; but if we would be led by her in invention, we should command her by action" (qtd. Ibid.), he set the tone for the Enlightenment's view of nature.

The dynamics described above are all crystallized in what Plumwood has termed a 'master identity,' which is fluid and serves to define power dynamics in myriad situations (Plumwood, 1994; Mathews, 2017). Mathews gives the example of a white woman in a colonial context. In relation to her male counterparts, this woman is usually defined by her proximity to nature, irrationality, emotionality, animality. In the colonial context, however, the white woman temporarily comes to represent all the superior terms, while the colonized or Indigenous people come to assume, relative to her, the inferior identity she usually occupies; associated with the irrationality, primitivism, animality, emotionality, and proximity to nature (Mathews 2017, p. 59; Plumwood, 1994). My reason for explaining all this is that central to the master identity, according to Plumwood, is the reason/nature (or mind/matter) dichotomy

(1994). As argued in the first section of this chapter, that which has come most essentially to define the human self in the Western paradigm, at least since Descartes, is the mind, or *reason,* construed as substantively distinct to feeling, the body, nature, and so on. This particular quality has been elevated above all else, and whoever is more closely associated with it in a particular situation, relative to the other actors involved, is elevated into a superior, more human, more civilized, more authoritative position (Mathews, 2017, p. 59). This reveals the connection between dualism and a defining tenet of modernity: rationalism, which is the foundation of modern Western anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. It also clarifies how the seemingly non-normative, purely ontological separation of mind and matter becomes a value-laden vehicle of political power-asymmetries. Thus, the disregard for the inanimate expressed in the traditional (environmental) ethical approaches previously outlined can be traced back to an ontological distinction between mind and matter, which has been imbued with value judgements through the Western normative dualist framework. Mind is seen not only as ontologically distinct from matter, but is furthermore seen as a tool by which matter, nature, the body, and so on, can be *mastered* (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002).

One objective of this chapter has been to demonstrate that ontological assumptions shape the ethical theories built upon them. The ontological framework underlying traditional Western (environmental) ethical approaches is rooted in Cartesian substance dualism, which has encouraged a rationalist and individualist conception of human identity and a mechanistic view of matter and the physical world. This ontological mind/matter dualism is accompanied by a dualist normative framework, which encourages us to regard matter as unimportant, and to attach moral worth to reason, mind, agency, and interests. When matter is seen as passive and lacking agency, and humans are seen as possessing unique subjectivity, representational power, and agency, this leads to an obfuscation of the relational, interconnected quality of the natural systems humans are embedded in. Chapter 3 will discuss a number of theoretical approaches which have traditionally been offered as alternatives to the individualist views described in Chapter 1, and examine whether they might allow us to depart from these dualisms and justify moral consideration of inanimate objects.

Chapter 3 - Alternative Ethical Approaches

As we saw in Chapter 1, the traditional views on moral status, represented by sentience or life-centered and egalitarian or hierarchical individualist views, do not offer much opportunity for moral consideration of inanimate objects. This is because they are based on an ontological framework which 1) starkly separates mind from matter, 2) sets the latter up as a passive substance lacking life, agency, or interests, and 3) conceives of subjects and objects as being static, discrete, ready-made units which interact with each other, but are nevertheless fully separable. They are also rooted in a broader normative framework which associates all manner of terms with mind and matter, and places them in hierarchical symbolic relationships. These factors have led to a particular ontological understanding of human identity, a particular understanding of the ontological make-up of the physical world and matter, and to a focus on individual subjects and objects, rather than on the relations and connections 'between' them. If an ethical approach is to extend moral consideration to inanimate objects and matter, it must depart from these ontological and normative dualisms. More specifically, it must be compatible with a non-dual, non-rationalistic definition of human identity, a non-dual understanding of mind and matter, and reject the ontological individualism, or 'atomism.'

Various kinds of holist views, as well as the deep ecology approach, have been offered in response to various alleged shortcomings of individualist views, though not necessarily out of concern for inanimate objects. More specifically, holism and deep ecology recognize and emphasize the importance of collectives, not just individuals. Deep ecology also explicitly tries to depart from the dualisms discussed in Chapter 2. This chapter assesses whether these alternative views might offer adequate avenues for moral consideration of inanimate objects. I will argue that while these alternatives offer some valuable insights, none of them fully succeed in providing adequate grounds for moral consideration of the inanimate and furthermore fail to fully depart from problematic dualisms. In Chapter 4 I will argue that they should be complemented with insights from ecofeminist, new materialist, and Indigenous philosophy. In the following section I will discuss holist views, before moving on to a discussion of deep ecology in the second section.

§3.1 - Holist Views

Where individualist theories take individuals to be the most important unit for moral consideration, holists consider 'wholes' to be the locus of moral value. Holist views are, of course, varied, but their general position is that wholes or collectives can be considered cohesive units, and that they are morally considerable. In environmental ethics this involves an emphasis on species, ecosystems, or the entire biosphere. Furthermore, holist views often hold that wholes have ethical *priority* over their parts (Palmer, 2005). Beyond this, holist environmental ethical theories vary greatly. They have different views, for example, on whether wholes are to be considered an individual unit or a web of connections, or which whole is the appropriate unit of focus. There are also different views on the source of wholes' value, on the moral value of individual parts of wholes, and on the source of individual parts' value if they are indeed considered valuable in their own right.

One example is Aldo Leopold's view. His book 'A Sand County Almanac' (1949) is often considered a foundational, albeit controversial, text in holist environmental ethics. He believes that individuals are valuable not because of their individual possession of qualities like rationality or sentience, but insofar as they contribute to the functioning of the whole (1949). Another example is Holmes Rolston's view, which involves a sort of synthesis of both individualist and holist values and holds that individuals, species, and ecosystems are valuable units (Rolston, 1988; Palmer, 2005). Individual organisms have inherent worth on account of being teleological centers of life with goods of their own (Ibid.). Entire species are also valuable not just in terms of the aggregate value of their individual members, but because they are an independent form of life which defends itself and thus has a good of its own (Ibid.). Finally, ecosystems are valuable in that they are an indispensable foundation for the lives of their individual constituents (Ibid.). Palmer summarizes Rolston's view as holding that "ethical attention should not be focused on an ecosystem as an individual, but rather as an interconnected matrix within which life evolved and continues to develop. As the womb of life, both producing and nurturing it, the ecosystem is an appropriate unit for moral concern. It would be bizarre, Rolston insists, to value the organisms, products of the system, without valuing the process which produced them" (2005).

Whatever different positions holist views may have, their central intuition demonstrates how inanimate things can possibly gain moral relevance in holist theories. If the

condition for moral importance is contribution to life-supporting systems, or simply membership of a morally significant whole or collective, then inanimate objects might meet the criteria for moral standing. One of holists' central critiques of individualists is that, in their focus on (interactions between) individuals, they overlook individuals' reliance on the systems that support their very existence (Palmer, 2005). If one ignores individuals' embeddedness in systems, one can also easily overlook the vital role that inanimate elements play in these systems.

Of course, not all holist views assign inherent worth to inanimate objects. Given their different positions on the source of inherent worth of individual parts of ecosystems, they disagree on whether nonsentient living things like plants possess inherent worth, or how their interests must be weighed against the interests of rational and sentient beings, for example. Nevertheless, if one argues that membership of a collective is what confers moral importance on entities, this creates an avenue for arguing that inanimate objects are morally important and considerable. Thus, the two most important insights to be gleaned form holist views are that individuals exist within and depend upon broader systems, and that insofar as all constitutive parts of this system are mutually dependent for their survival, they are all morally significant. Of course, this statement requires some qualification: within particular systems certain actors are harmful to the whole, as in the case of invasive species in a particular ecosystem. On a macro-scale, however, all the Earth's constituents co-evolved, and interconnectedness and mutual dependence, support, and constitution are facts which holist views rightly emphasize but individualist views risk overlooking. From here we can argue that the inanimate world does more than provide a mere backdrop for human and other animal activities, and that it is thus also morally significant in a way that ought, perhaps, to inspire some level of moral respect or recognition.

Nevertheless, and despite these valuable insights, holist views have some drawbacks for our purposes. One is that they do not fully depart from ontological individualism. Second, they do not truly provide satisfactory grounds for moral status for inanimate objects. As a result, they maintain various dualisms and dualist logic generally. The following paragraphs will elaborate on these critiques in turn.

Both iterations which define wholes as morally significant individual units, and iterations like Rolston's which value ecosystems insofar as they produce and support the individual lives of the system's constituents, do not question the ontological category of

'individual' somethings, be they biotic wholes or their individual members. Rather than de-centering individuals, the former iteration simply shifts its focus to a different, more 'broadly' defined individual unit, whereas the latter iterations consider wholes a collection of individual members. Thus, as mentioned in Chapter 1, holist views are individualist in the ontological sense that they understand individuals to be discrete, ready-made entities which can be described as universally possessing certain qualities which make them morally considerable. Though this ontological conception of individuals has a robust background in the Western philosophical canon, this position nevertheless demonstrates an ontological focus on individuals, conceived in a very particular way, as opposed to a focus on relationships and connections which do not only occur *between* individuals, but actively *constitute* them. Individuals are prioritized, while the relations which constitute them are somewhat overlooked. Put differently, while holist theories do go some way in recognizing the fact and moral significance of the interconnectedness of a collective's constituents, they fall short of emphasizing the kind of relationality discussed by Reddekop (2014), described in Chapter 2. That is, while they recognize the interconnectedness of individual beings, they are still based on an ontological understanding of individuals as separate entities. The difference between relationality and simply acknowledging interconnectedness is an *ontological* difference, as will be elucidated in Chapter 4.

Secondly, while holist theories do offer some room for valuing inanimate objects and matter, this is only insofar as the inanimate are members of or contribute to the functioning of the biotic system. On this view, inanimate objects remain only instrumentally or derivatively valuable, rather than mattering for their own sake. Finally, holist theories fail to depart fully from the dualist framework I sought to problematize in Chapter 1. The ontological divisions of the animate subject from the inanimate object, of living mind and inert matter, still stand, as does the normative schema which prioritize the former over the latter terms.

§3.2 - Deep Ecology

Deep ecology is often associated with holism, but I treat it here separately because it has developed a significant following and is one of the more radical departures from the traditional views, although it is nevertheless a permanent fixture in environmental ethics

curricula. What sets deep ecology apart from other (holist) ethical theories is, perhaps, that it is not just a philosophical approach, but rather a political, social, and ideological *movement.*

Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess was dissatisfied with what he called the 'shallow ecology' movement, which takes a solely instrumental view of the natural world, and approaches environmental issues from the anthropocentric aim of protecting the wellbeing and affluence of people in 'developed countries' (Baard, 2015, p. 25; Katz et al., 2000). In 1972 he thus coined the term 'deep ecology,' wanting to promote a holistic environmental ethic and effect not just "a slight reform of our present society, but a substantial reorientation of our whole worldview" and of the "social structure of modernity" (Katz et al., 2000, p. ix). In fact, Katz et al. argue, deep ecology has an explicitly ontological orientation, wanting to construct an ideology which centers the "fundamental ontological interrelatedness and identification of all life forms, natural objects, and ecosystems" (Ibid., p. xiv), and strives not to be just one of many environmental ethical *theories* proposed within the standard ontological framework, but to propose a different ontology or worldview from which ethical and political recommendations are to be derived (Baard, 2015; Katz et al., 2000).

Another central characteristic of deep ecology is its assertion of the inherent worth of the natural world. This is expressed in the first of its eight tenets, which states that "the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth, intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes." (Naess & Sessions, 1984)

Furthermore, deep ecology calls for the development of a human identity which integrates the inherent worth of nature into its fundamental understanding of self. In other words, deep ecology calls for the development of a new, ecological conception of self, stylized as the 'Self,' through "the process of forming a metaphysical commitment to the earth, referred to as *self-realization,* an unfolding of the self out into nature to attain a transcendental, *non-egoic,* state" (Smith & Gough, 2015; Naess, 1995). The Self should transcend the narrow individual ego and strive to be "as expansive a sense of self as possible" (Fox 1990b, p. 106). Humans are to identify not only with themselves, as individuals and as human beings, but rather to recognize that their interconnectedness with and dependence on the natural world means that they should respond to other beings' interests as *their* interests (Plumwood, 1994; Naess, 1984, p. 261). This takes the expansionist approach of the

traditional views a step further in calling not just for an expansion of the moral circle, but a metaphysical expansion of one's concept of self.

Deep ecology can, perhaps, carry us slightly further in the direction of moral consideration for the inanimate than the previously discussed holist views. I identified three issues with holist views, namely their apparent commitment to ontological individualism, the instrumental, life-supporting value assigned to the inanimate, and their continued upholding of certain significant dualisms. Deep ecology goes some way in ameliorating these concerns. For example, its explicit call for a change in our ontological stance, for an understanding of the human Self as intimately connected with our environments, goes some way in rejecting ontological individualism by emphasizing relationality. It also contributes to providing grounds for moral consideration of the inanimate aspects of the natural world by asserting the natural world's inherent, non-instrumental worth. In fact, Smith and Gough (2015) note, deep ecology calls for "love and respect of all nature (Fox 1990b), including the inanimate parts of the ecosystem such as mountains and rivers" (p. 40). Naess was, on this point, inspired by Spinoza's metaphysics (Naess, 2005). Through the development of the ecological Self we can come to truly integrate the notion of the inherent worth of all of nature into our identities, and come to identify our interests with the interests of the entire biosphere. Furthermore, deep ecology aims to undermine the human/nature dualism, for which Self-realization is its strategy.

This desire to undermine human/nature dualism is promising, and at first glance, deep ecology appears quite compatible with the criteria described in the introduction to this chapter. It explicitly intends to reject human/nature dualism, and questions our metaphysical separation from, and presumed superiority to, the rest of the world. Furthermore, its plea that we expand our idea of self to include all of nature, including, apparently, mountains and rivers, creates potential for a non-instrumental valuing of inanimate objects. Nevertheless, deep ecology falls short of the mark, and in its current form is cannot full support assertion of the inherent worth of inanimate matter. For one, its central tenets are expressed in life-centered language, asserting the inherent worth of all "human and nonhuman *life* on Earth" (Naess & Sessions, 1984). Although Smith and Gough (2015) claim that deep ecology calls for love and respect of inanimate elements of the natural world, this is not reflected in deep ecology's language. Its position on inanimate objects is vague, and given the life-centered formulation of its central tenets it appears not to explicitly recognize the dualist distinction

that is made between the animate and inanimate. This life-centeredness is also reflected in the Self-realization strategy. The aim of developing the Self is to get humans to identify with the *interests* of nonhumans. Insofar as only living things can have interests, the strategy is still inherently life-centered.

Moreover, even though deep ecology aims to undermine human/nature dualism using the Self-realization strategy, it fails to undermine or question other dualisms that underlie the human/nature dichotomy. The Self-realization strategy calls for a departure from individual egoism, from human selfishness and a failure to identify with the interests of other beings with whom we are inescapably linked. In her discussion of the Self, Plumwood notes that the strategy aligns with a broader tradition in Western ethics which tends to value the universal over the particular as a route to sound ethical reasoning (1991). Moral progress is attained through a rational, detached, universalizing approach; by moving away from "the merely particular - *my* self, *my* family, *my* tribe" (Plumwood, 1991, p. 6). Subjectivity, personal attachments, particularity, intuition, and emotions are seen as potentially "corrupting, capricious, and self-interested" (Ibid.). Plumwood's ecofeminist analysis points out that this preference is gendered - detached rationality is associated with the masculine, while private and personal ties, embodied care practices, emotions, irrationality, and subjectivity are associated with the feminine - these normative associations are codified in the normative dualism framework described in Chapter 2. Moreover, this means that the partiality/ impartiality dualism is linked to other dualist hierarchical relations, including human/nature dualism and animate/inanimate dualism. Ecofeminists are suspicious of theories which reject some but not all dualisms, because, since all dualisms are interconnected through the normative dualist schema, rejecting one dualist set but not others renders the rejection incomplete.

Therefore, although the Self-realization strategy tries to dissolve human/nature dualism by grounding extension of moral concern to nonhumans in human identity, it does so by upholding other traditional dualisms strongly associated with the human/nature dichotomy. If this seems a minor point, Plumwood elsewhere notes the irony and "inconsistency of employing, in the service of constructing an allegedly biocentric ethical theory, a framework which has played such a major role in creating a dualistic account of the genuine human self as essentially rational, and discontinuous from the *merely* emotional, the *merely* bodily and the *merely* animal" (Plumwood, 1994, p. 168).

Furthermore, though well-intentioned, deep ecology's denial of difference also has problematic consequences. If others are "recognized morally only to the extent that they are incorporated into the self" (Plumwood, 1994, p. 180) and their difference and independence is denied, this amounts to a denial of their inherent worth (Katz et al., 2000). It also amounts to a concession that humans can only be expected to care about others if it is somehow self-serving, and that altruism and self-interest cannot coexist. In an effort to distance itself from altruism as grounds for consideration of the nonhuman world, which Naess considers an unreliable impetus (1986), it instead opts to expand the sphere of human self-interest and egoism. The construction of altruism or self-interest as two mutually exclusive options tacitly endorses yet another dualism: the self/other dualism. Escaping this dualism requires not an erasure of difference through the identification of oneself with everything else, but the recognition that 'individual' entities have different interests and needs, which can conflict, but are nevertheless inextricably linked and co-constitutive of each other. This critique will be further elaborated in Section 2 of the next chapter, where I will discuss how a virtue-based approach may offer viable alternative grounds for human identity.

As was argued in Chapter 2, the dualisms in the normative and ontological dualist frameworks are all interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Thus, a true rejection of human/ nature dualism also requires a rejection of the subject/object, animate/inanimate, and mind/ matter dichotomies. Deep ecology is, in this sense, insufficiently non-dualist, and insufficiently discontinuous from mainstream ethical approaches. It thus fails to yield adequate grounds for moral consideration of inanimate objects.

§3.3 - Conclusions

The main takeaway of this chapter is that holist and deep ecological views have some insights to offer, but nevertheless maintain dualist characteristics, which I identified in the introduction to this chapter as incompatible with moral considerability for inanimate matter. The insights to be gleaned from holism and deep ecology are the following. Where individualist theories obscure the significance of wholes or collectives, holist theories place primacy on them. This encourages us to acknowledge the significance of inanimate elements of the world: the functioning of biotic systems and the lives of their constituent parts depend on inanimate contributors. Nevertheless, holist theories do not provide satisfactory grounds for arguing that

inanimate matter has inherent worth - its worth is conditional upon its contribution to life supporting systems, or the survival of one single system, and is thus instrumental. They furthermore endorse ontological individualism, as they do not question the atomistic view of individuals, and shift their focus from individual living entities to collectives or wholes as the unit of primary moral importance. As such, holist theories are grounded in a number of dualisms, and exist within the bounds of a dualist ontological framework.

Deep ecology goes a step further than holist theories in rejecting the premises of individualist theories and the dualisms underlying them. It attempts to reject human exceptionalism and human/nature dualism by asserting the inherent worth of nonhuman entities and nature. It also advocates for an ontological reconceptualization of the human Self which centers relationality and interconnectedness, whereby it acknowledges that underlying ontological assumptions influence our way of relating to the world. This is an important takeaway: there is a relationship between humans' self-conception, and our mode of relating to the world. Despite its intentions, however, deep ecology remains life-centered and its Self-realization strategy maintains several dualisms. As argued by Plumwood (1994), the Self-realization strategy is grounded in a normative dualism which prioritizes impartiality over partiality, thereby also endorsing the rationalism borne of mind/matter dualism and related dualisms. Thus, both holist and deep ecological views' understandings of humans and nature are predicated upon normative and ontological dualisms.

Chapter 4 - Alternative (Ontological) Frameworks

The foregoing chapters discussed traditional Western theories of moral status and whether they are able to accommodate moral consideration of the inanimate. I argued that they are unable to because they are grounded in dualistic ontological and normative frameworks which lead to particular perceptions of humans, matter, and the relationship between them. I have noted that while holist approaches and deep ecology, which are often offered as alternatives to the traditional views, do offer some valuable insights into the relevance of the inanimate in the interconnected systems living beings depend on, they are nevertheless based in the same ontological and normative dualist frameworks which subjugate matter in the first place. They are therefore ultimately unable to offer satisfactory grounds for moral consideration of the inanimate. The following chapter outlines how insights from new materialist, ecofeminist, and

Indigenous scholarship can offer alternative ways to understand humans, matter, and their relationship. I will argue that new materialisms offer an alternative to ontological dualism, that insights from ecofeminist virtue ethics illustrate how we may reorient human identity around a non-dual normative framework, and that we may look to Indigenous scholarship and ontologies for guidance in applying these insights to our ethical behaviors. In the fifth and final chapter, I will discuss hoe these insights might change our perception of what is at stake in a particular case study.

§4.1 - 'New' Materialism

New materialism(s) emerged at the turn of the millennium, as part of the broader materialist or ontological turn seen in various disciplines, and in response to mounting critiques of "the foundational binaries of modern thought, especially the nature/culture, object/subject, human/thing dualisms, whose anthropocentric biases are seen to have led to the current ecological and civilizational crises and the incapacity to think through and adequately engage with them" (Plate, 2020).

Given the relative newness of this field and the interdisciplinary nature of its emergence, it encompasses various different viewpoints, approaches, and debates. Despite their differences, new materialists tend to share a common motivation, namely problematizing the "perceived neglect or diminishment of matter in the dominant Euro-Western tradition as passive substance intrinsically devoid of meaning" (2019, p. 111). Given the diversity of new materialist viewpoints endorsing a particular stream is beyond the scope of this thesis, however I will discuss their general insights in order to demonstrate the potential that these alternative ontological approaches hold for a reconfiguration of our understandings of human identity and inanimate matter, and for the environmental ethical approaches we might build upon them.

Let us recall that Cartesian ontological dualism is underpinned by an epistemological theory which posits human subjects as external observers of the objective physical world. On this view, humans are able to observe objects and the broader world without affecting them, as if from outside. Furthermore, the observed objects are generally viewed as static, complete, and discrete: inert units which lack agency and do not change or interact with their environments of their own accord. An object, as put by Heidegger, "stands before us as a *fait*

accompli, presenting its congealed, outer surfaces to our inspection. It is defined by its very 'over-againstness' in relation to the setting in which it is placed" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 167; qtd. Ingold, 2010, p. 4). Tim Ingold (2010) attempts to challenge this view of objects, inviting us to imagine a stone: Though we are wont to see a stone as an object in the sense just described, "it is only so if we artificially excise it from the process of erosion and deposition that brought it here and lent it the size and shape it presently has" (Ibid.). Though a stone does not move or change quickly, it is nevertheless constantly moving, changing, and 'leaking' into its environment. This constant leaking means that it cannot really be divorced from its surroundings and that its boundaries are dynamic and not absolute. Furthermore, it implies that the stone is constantly acting on, interacting with, and affecting its environment, albeit, perhaps, imperceptibly and very slowly. Ingold's aim in asserting this is to develop an "ontology that assigns primacy to *processes of formation* as against their final products, and to *flows and transformations of materials* as against ['final'] states of matter" (2010, pp. 2-3, emphasis added).

Karen Barad's work offers an even more radical departure from Descartes' ontology and epistemology (2007). Her 'agential realism' is borne of her reading of Niels Bohr's work on quantum physics, particularly with regards to the phenomenon that light appears either as a wave or as a particle depending on one's experimental arrangement (Gamble et al., 2010). On the basis of her reading of Bohr, Barad argues that matter is inherently *indeterminate*. That is, light and other material entities or assemblages of matter are relatively determinate in that they are fairly stable phenomena, but they nevertheless "[do] not entirely precede - and [are] not fully separable from - the physical, material apparatus used to observe [them]" (Ibid., p. 122). In contrast to the Cartesian view of the observing subject as fully removed from the passive objects she observes, Barad's onto-epistemology posits observation as an "intra-active" and reciprocal process, which influences the ontologies of both the observer and the observed. That is, observation plays a *constitutive* role, and "humans (like everything else) always partly constitute and *are partly constituted by* that which they observe" (Ibid., p. 123, emphasis added). When one observes light, one is, in fact, influencing, and thus co-constituting, its ontological form. This effect is mutual and reciprocal. Given that humans are part of the "larger material configuration of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 342) they cannot be excised from the intra-action of matter. Thus, this onto-epistemological account of the world is thoroughly relational, in that even 'hands-off' observers cannot engage 'passive' objects

without affecting and being affected by them. Every interaction alters or co-constitutes the ontology of both (or all) entities involved.

Barad's view has a number of implications pertaining to the ontology of inanimate matter, the ontology of human beings, and the nature of agency. Regarding matter, Barad's view contrasts with what Gamble et al. describe as "the atomistic trend of treating matter as a passive entity that must be animated by something immaterial and outside the flux and movement of matter itself: force" (2010, p. 116). Instead, matter gains an agentive quality in that it is active, and effects changes in the other assemblages of matter it encounters. Furthermore, any property a being might have, including agency, never entirely precedes its interactions with other entities or things. At least a part of an entity's being is constituted and determined, in its entirety, through its very interactions. Agency, on this view, is something which intra-acting entities perform, engender, constitute, and *are*, through their intra-actions. In this sense, agency is performance or matter itself, and matter simply *is* what it *does* (Gamble et al., 2019; Barad, 2007; Coole, 2019). Regarding humans, this understanding of all material entities as fundamentally relational and intra-active reconfigures the human being as both subject and object, or, as Coole puts it, "as simultaneously touching and touched, the body is both an active, sentient existent and a passive, sensible object" (2017). The upshot of this kind of agential realism is thus that the ontological dichotomy between agentive human subject and passive material object is dissolved. Such materialist views also remove agency, or life, or will, from the domain of mental substance, and conceive of it as something that emerges from, or is enacted by the movements of matter itself.

Barad's view of agency is not the only one in the diverse field of new materialism. In general, Jovanović notes, "new materialisms are committed to a pluralization of agency" (2020, p. 248), seeking to disrupt the trend in modern Western thinking wherein agency has not just been conventionally understood as "a distinctive property of humans, but in many cases as the characteristic that defines them as a distinctive and privileged species thanks to their capacities for cognition and rationality (Coole, 2017). However, new materialists' approaches and definitions of agency vary. While Barad sees it as a performance, Ingold believes that the 'problem of agency' arises from a double-reduction "of things to objects and of life to agency" (Ingold, 2010, p. 12). That is, Ingold understands life not as a characteristic possessed by certain types of individual entities, but rather as a property inherent to the very flows of materials which constitute those entities, and within or between which they are

temporarily held in place (2010). Because objects, like the aforementioned stone, are constantly moving, life is located, according to Ingold, in the "irrepressible discharge of substance through the porous surfaces of emergent forms. … Things are alive because they *leak*. Life… will not be contained, but inheres in the very circulation of materials that continually give rise to the forms of things even as they portend their dissolution" (Ibid.). Thus, on Ingold's view, 'objects' are seen as lacking agency simply because they have been "deadened or rendered inert by arresting the flows of substances that give them life" (Ibid.). Having arrested these flows, the only way we can conceive of matter as active is through the attribution of agency. However, if we take an ontological position which conceives of matter as inherently active, or 'alive,' there is no need to re-animate it.

Coole (2017) has yet another view on agency. She notes that "new materialists maintain that agency is distributed across a far greater range of entities than had formerly been imagined," but that the question remains what the nature of agency is, and exactly how widely it is distributed. In any event, new materialists' central intuition is that agency is corporeal, in that it can never be fully excised from the physical or corporeal contexts and processes that house and enable its emergence. She proposes two basic capacities that are involved in the possession or performance of agency: "the active potency or efficacy needed to bring about change" and "the reflexivity for these effects to matter to their perpetrator, thus endowing the latter with motivation to act" (2017). Since the basic criterion for these capacities is corporeality, agency can in principle be extended far wider than before; beyond humans and animals of similar cognition, to other physical entities. However, Coole herself is nevertheless hesitant to attribute agency to inanimate or inorganic things, because they lack the reflexivity that would motivate them to act. In other words, they lack interests, and "in remaining indifferent to the impact of their efficacy, they lack motivation to change themselves or the world in order to improve their life chances or wellbeing" (Ibid.). Coole's particular understanding of agency still requires potential agents to possess motivations, or interests, but she acknowledges that other theorists, like Bruno Latour and some vital materialists like Bennett (2010), *do* conceive of non-organic entities as potentially possessing agency.

Of course, these positions represent a radical departure from the norm, and given the relative novelty and interdisciplinary backgrounds of the various contributors to the field, the matter of agency requires further discussion. Nevertheless, these diverse viewpoints,

grounded in a shared political aim of disrupting the power structures associated with paradigmatic modern normative and ontological frameworks, demonstrate that alternative ontological approaches are up for consideration. Moreover, they demonstrate that matter may matter more than previously thought, and that acts upon us as much as we act upon it. On the basis of these alternative ontologies, we might be able to construct different environmental ethical approaches which account for a more reciprocal relationship with inanimate formations of matter.

Even so, one might question whether this would really lead to radically different ethics. If we did eventually reach a consensus that matter is agentive, intra-active, and responsive, it would still presumably lack interests, preferences, or the ability to suffer harm. As such, any change on their part would be morally neutral for them. I will return to this matter in Section 4.3, where I will discuss insights from Indigenous scholarship. Before doing so, however, I will note that even without conceiving of matter as agentive and able to suffer, the new materialist shift in understanding of humans and matter could lead to a profound change in the way we interact with the world. Seeing humans as fundamentally material; understanding mind, consciousness, and agency as inherently and necessarily corporeal; and seeing matter as inherently active rather than a passive, inert subject of human will and external forces, already engenders a radical departure from the common current worldview.

A greater attentiveness to the prolificacy of nonhuman actors "operating outside and inside the human body" (Bennett, 2010) could disrupt the sense one might have, when alone in a room of objects, that one is surrounded by a static and lifeless environment; in leading us to cultivate greater awareness of, and respect for "nonhuman otherness and agency" (Coole, 2017), new questions about the possible activities and effects of the objects, or dynamic assemblages of matter, around us might arise. In turn, this might lead us to develop a more 'ecological sensibility,' or an awareness that our actions have short- and far-reaching consequences, on both a temporal and spatial scale, which we are presently not attuned to.

Our current way of being in the world, by contrast, appears influenced by the impression that our actions, like patterns of consumption and production, are somehow isolated from broader chains of inter- and intra-action, and mostly involve passive objects. As Plumwood put it, the "message of continuity and dependency is so revolutionary in the context of the modern world [because] the dominant strands of western culture have for so long denied it, and have given us a model of human identity and only minimally and

accidentally connected to the earth" (1994, p. 6). Though it may be difficult at this point to fully imagine the implications that such a (relatively conservative) shift of ontological foundations might have for our ethics, it is nevertheless a massive departure from our current understanding of humans, nonhumans, and their relationship. If we are no longer the sole subjects in a world of objects (and slightly less subjective subjects, like nonhuman animals), this already significantly disrupts the normative dualist schema which underlies the modern worldview, and challenges significant elements of Plumwood's 'master identity,' mentioned in Chapter 2.

The need for such a shift in perception is highlighted by the increasingly emergent fact that we live in the Anthropocene, "an era in which humans' manipulation of matter is imprinted in the very geological fabric of the earth" (Coole, 2017). A more profound recognition of the profoundly relational and impactful interactions of living and non-living assemblages of matter, which affect involved actors' ontology and actively constitute their capacity for agency moment to moment, may lead us to think more proactively in our assessments of, say, mining projects or other activities. A more acute sense of flows of materials may allow us to better appreciate and anticipate things like the proliferation of micro-plastics or 'forever chemicals' (Salvidge & Hosea, 2023), which infiltrate ecosystems and food chains when we wash clothes made of synthetic materials, or use certain kinds of products. "From this perspective," Coole notes, "the materialist turn is responding to an urgent need for the social sciences to direct their critical attention to imminent threats to life itself." (2017).

§4.2 - Virtue Ethics as an Alternative to 'Self-realization'

As noted in Chapter 3, deep ecologists also believe that an ontological reorientation is vital for developing a different relationship with the natural environment. For them, this reorientation should center around humans' self-perception; they urge us to develop an ecological Self which expands the sphere of self-interest to include the rest of the natural world. Plumwood has argued that the Self-realization strategy nevertheless fails to reject other dualisms which underlie the human/nature dualism deep ecology seeks to subvert. As an alternative, she suggests a "virtuebased way to conceive the ecological self and ecological sensibility" whereby we might ground "identity in an environmental ethics of care" (Plumwood, 1994, p. 166). In other words, she rejects the idea of an ecological Self based in

an expansion of self-interest and a rejection of partiality, bioregional ties, and embeddedness in interpersonal relations. Instead she advocates for a relational conception of the human self, which recognizes the vital role personal attachments and moral feelings like empathy and care play in (human) animals' actual moral lives (Ibid., pp. 180-185), and on the basis of which virtues rooted in one's particular relationships and roles can be articulated.

One merit of this approach is that it avoids the normative dualisms borne of mind/ matter dualism, which are associated with traditional ethical approaches and which deep ecologists allegedly fail to fully reject. Blum (1980), Gilligan (1982, 1987) and other feminist ethicists have argued that instinctual, emotional, and body-based desires to care for others tend, in traditional ethical theories, to be dismissed as not truly moral impulses. They are considered instinctual and emotional, rather than being consciously and willfully chosen, and are thus treated as almost morally irrelevant, or even corrupting (Plumwood, 1991; Taylor, 1986). Virtue-based approaches, however, hold that such embodied, emotional elements are essential components of our moral lives (Plumwood, 1991). In this sense, a virtue-ethical approach rejects the normative judgement attached to mind/body dualism where deep ecologists do not, by subverting the normative valuation of the mind over the body as a source of ethical impetus.

This virtue-based approach is also more compatible with new materialist ontologies than the deep ecological Self, in that it avoids the denial of difference mentioned in Chapter 3, as well as dichotomization of self and other, and of altruism and self-interest. Let us recall that Naess wants to ground care for others in the expanded Self because he finds altruism an unsatisfactory moral impetus. That is, according to him, "everything that can be achieved by altruism - the *dutiful, moral* consideration for others - can be achieved, and much more, by the process of widening and deepening ourselves" (1986, 226). This position is based in a dichotomization of altruism and self-interest, and it is unsurprising that feminist ethicists would regard such a move with suspicion; since care work tends to be gendered, feminist ethicists are cognizant of the inextricability of altruism and self-interest, both in care work and interpersonal relations (which, again, tend to overlap in women's personal lives more frequently than in men's, given gendered divisions of care work). This false altruism/egoism dichotomy, as well as a binary view of self and other, underlies Naess's view that expanding one's self to identify with all others - a move which is predicated upon a denial of difference or separateness - is the way to go in environmental ethics. It also implies ontological

individualism: the self is discrete and bounded, whether defined in a narrow 'egotistical' way, or on an almost global or even cosmic scale.

On the virtue-ethical view, however, self-interest and altruism are not dualised, and neither are self and other, or independence and interdependence. This corresponds with the non-dual foundation of new materialism, wherein the dichotomy between self and other is erased, while the temporary boundedness is nevertheless maintained. That is, new materialists view forms or states of matter as temporary configurations of moving materials, always in flux, but nevertheless temporarily bounded. In Coole's words, "while entities or assemblages may be unstable and complex, they do have recognizable boundaries. It is just that they are porous, permeable, and enmeshed with other systems" (2017). Thus, rather than depending on an expansion of Self, a virtue ethical approach can accommodate the interconnection between entities while recognizing their relative separateness, and can understand these relations as being simultaneously altruistic and self-serving. Thus, human selfhood can be grounded in a relational, ecological identity, while avoiding normative dualistic logic, erasure of difference, *and* ontological atomism. These considerations are relevant to the moral standing of inanimate objects and matter because these normative dualisms are precisely what underlie the rationalist notion of human exceptionality, and the subordination of the body, matter and nonhuman nature, but also because, as we shall see in the following section, virtue-based and relational ethics become particularly relevant in contexts where numerous nonhuman others are conceived of as agentive moral interlocutors.

§4.3 - Indigenous Perspectives

In Section 4.1 I noted that one might question whether the ontological shift prescribed by new materialists would really have any ethical implications for treatment of the inanimate. That is, even if we conceive of matter as agentive and active, the question remains what this ought to mean given that inanimate objects and matter cannot feel pain, suffer harm, or possess interests. It is here that Indigenous scholarship has considerable insights to offer, since, Rosiek et al. note, "an ontology that includes nonhuman agency as well as a conception of ethics including more than human-to-human relations has long been a starting point for analysis" within Indigenous studies (2019, p. 332; Deloria, 1988; Todd, 2014).

While Indigenous people's views tend to be understood as 'animist' (Warren, 1997) - a worldview largely dismissed by Western academia and culture as "a simple religion and failed epistemology" and ontology (Bird-David, 1999, p. 67) - it is becoming increasingly clear, especially to scholars interested in new materialism, agential realism, and other relational ontologies, that Indigenous worldviews actually represent a variety of agent ontologies which parallel emergent Western new materialisms and comprise an "Indigenous tradition of thought which vastly predates the emergence of new materialism philosophies of science" (Rosiek et al., 2019, p. 333). While those operating within the Western canon are at pains to theorize or justify non-human agency and create a new vocabulary in order to critique dominant Western ontologies and logics from within (Jones & Kawehan Hoskins, 2016), Indigenous peoples' vocabularies and concepts are already rooted in the notion of "pervasive non-human agency" (Rosiek et al,, p. 336). Thus, while "there has been little exploration in the new materialist social science literature of what specific performances of an ethical reciprocity with non-human agents would look like" (Ibid.), Indigenous scholarship on this subject has been working out exactly how these ontological understandings ought to be translated into daily ethical practice.

A problem, however, is that the two 'fields' are rooted in distinctive philosophical backgrounds, making insights difficult to share directly. An example of this discord is that the notion of non-human agency is rarely introduced as a general concept in the literature because it is generally taken as a given (Ibid., p. 337), and, moreover, Indigenous theory tends to prioritize "the performative establishment of particular relational entanglements with non-human agents over seeking generalizable understanding of that agency" (Ibid., p. 339). There is a resistance to abstraction, universalization, and objectification, precisely because the agency, life, and other properties are seen as emerging out of particular circumstances (Deloria, 1999). As Watts (2013) notes, "it is not that Indigenous peoples do not theorize, but that these complex theories are not distinct from place" (p. 22). It is thus not a question of establishing how we should relate to *all* non-human agents, but rather what matters is "the particular relationship you have with a particular tree or a particular mountain" (Deloria 1999, p. 223).

Indigenous agent ontologies and ethics are not, of course, a monolith. But a recurring theme in Indigenous studies literature is one of relations between both human and non-human agents being framed in terms of ethical reciprocity, understood as "a practice of attending to

the way our existence is interdependent with networks of relations" and "of considering consequences of our actions" for the communities in which we are embedded, and "on which our being depends" (Rosiek et al., 2019, p. 340; Reddekop 2014). Such a reciprocal attitude is contrasted with an extractive way of being in a world, which a view of the world as an inert bank of natural resources may encourage (Simpson, 2017). Here virtue ethics reemerges as a promising theoretical path, given that, on a virtue ethical account, one's moral obligations and responsibilities are "based on a set of commitments inherent in a particular type of identity" (McIntyre 1982; Poole 1991; qtd. Plumwood, 1994, p. 185), which is, on a new materialist or agentive ontological account, constituted through one's very interactions and relationships with others.

Reddekop (2014) provides an example from the Tlingit people of the North Pacific Coastal region of America. He notes that in the Tlingit worldview, existing in a particular environment and "subsisting on the land - gathering, fishing, responding to its changing rhythms, taking care of it - … *performs* and *lives-out* what it means to be a respectful relative in an extended community of human and non-human persons" (2014, p.143, emphasis added). Interaction with the environment is viewed in terms of what it means to be a respectful, virtuous ethical agent and interlocutor, who contributes to the functioning of the whole with care and attention. This relational approach conceives of ethics as centered on reciprocal engagement which sustains mutual benefit and wellbeing, both on an interpersonal and a systemic level. Here we also see that a virtue based relational approach allows us to retain difference while also emphasizing connection and interdependence in a way that deep ecology failed to do. When we are in relationship with others, our distinctness and positionality factor into the ethical and care demands we are subject to. It is not merely about looking out for one's own interests and avoiding impinging on others' rights, or about negating and dissolving self into other to expand the locus of self interest. It is about being a responsible and virtuous agent in relation to others who are, like the agent, constituted by and embedded in communities, networks, and relationships. Thus, a relational and virtue based approach makes sense of the role of affect, and avoids grounding moral obligations in a depersonalized and detached framework.

If one understands the world as consisting, in its material entirety, of agentive, living entities, this produces a view of the one's every movement in the world as inherently intra-active, relational, and reciprocal. Every "action, behavior, and belief," Deloria writes (1999),

takes on a relational, and thus a personal and ethical dimension. Whether or not an individual object one encounters possesses interests or preferences becomes less relevant when the boundaries between everything are less stark and discrete than on the atomistic understanding of the world. What relationality means, here, is that no action can be divorced from the greater environment. My exploration of practical Indigenous ethical frameworks must remain limited, due to the scope of this thesis and because Indigenous agentive ontologies and ethical frameworks are as numerous as Indigenous peoples themselves. Nevertheless, I hope to have given some indication of the way in which an agentive or new materialist ontology might influence the way we interact with our material environments. Furthermore, I note that there remains relatively little engagement between Indigenous and Western (new materialist) literatures, and the vocabularies and underlying conceptual frameworks of these fields remain vastly different. As such, I stress the need for further engagement with Indigenous scholarship on this subject, and identify this as a promising and important area for future research.

Chapter 5 - A Case Study: Juukan Gorge

The insights from new materialism, ecofeminism, and Indigenous philosophy presented in the previous chapter can hopefully contribute to a richer view of what is at stake in our interactions with inanimate natural bodies and systems. This short final chapter attempts to illustrate this through a case study, namely the case of the Juukan Gorge cave system in Pilbara, Western Australia, which was the center of a scandal when it was destroyed by mining giant Rio Tinto in May 2020 (Langton & Godden, 2020).

Juukan Gorge is a site of significant archaeological and cultural importance. Before its destruction, the cave systems contained evidence of continuous human occupation dating back 46,000 years, making it one of the oldest continually inhabited sites in Australia, and possibly the world (Langton & Godden, 2020). The Juukan Gorge is also a sacred site for the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) Peoples, who have inhabited that region of Pilbara for centuries. For example, DNA testing demonstrated that a braided belt made of human hair found in the caves was 4,000 years old, and made of hair from various individuals who genetically matched present day PKKP people. In May 2020, mining giant Rio Tinto blew the cave system up with dynamite as part of an iron ore exploration project.

The outrage and news coverage surrounding the incident, as is usually the case when sacred Indigenous or ethnographic sites are defaced, was generally framed in anthropocentric terms. The caves themselves, it is presumed, suffered no moral injury because they are inanimate. The moral dimensions of the problem pertain to the humans involved: The destruction of the caves was a breathtaking example of corporate irresponsibility and legislative failure. It amounted to a continuation of colonial discrimination and disenfranchisement of Australian Aboriginal peoples. It was an affront to humans generally, as this significant archaeological site was a part of global historic and cultural patrimony. And, most especially, it was an affront to the Aboriginal tribes for whom the site is sacred. The standard Western framing of the moral dimensions of the destruction differ, however, from the PKKP Peoples' perception of the events.

According to the PKKP Aboriginal Corporation, which represents the PKKP peoples and administers their traditional lands and waters, the effect of the destruction of spiritual sites like Juukan Gorge can be described in the following terms:

".. the people, the ancestral spirits, the land and everything on it are 'organic parts of one dissoluble whole'; the effects [of the destruction of sites] on the sense of connection are not to be understood as referable to individual blocks of land but understood by the 'pervasiveness of Dreaming'; the effects are upon an Aboriginal person's feelings, in the sense of his or her engagement with the Dreamings; an act can have an adverse effect by physically damaging a sacred site, but it can also affect a person's perception of an engagement with the Dreamings because the Dreamings are not site specific but run through a larger area of the land; and as a person's connection with country carries with it an obligation to care for it, there is a resulting sense of failed responsibility when it is damaged or affected in a way which cuts through the Dreamings.'" (As described by the High Court of Australia in Northern Territory v Griffith (2019) HCA 7 at [206]) (Shanafelt Wong, 2022).

This describes the specific effects of destruction of sacred sites for an Aboriginal *person*, but it is full of inferences to the more-than-human. People are intertwined and in relation with "ancestral spirits, the land and *everything on it"*, all of which are connected through the Dreamings - the cosmological origin story which itself is seen as an agentive being, and which records the history, the present, and the future of the particular Country, which can be understood, in shorthand, as the 'sentient land' (Moreton-Robinson, 2020). Moreton-Robinson writes that Aboriginal people's "sense of belonging is derived from an ontological relationship

to country derived from Dreaming" (2020). Thus, the destruction of the caves, for the PKKP Peoples, was not just an affront to their historical patrimony and their rights to manage their ancestral lands or have their particular religious or spiritual beliefs respected. It was something much deeper. It was an affront to the very land which the Dreaming instructs them to protect, and to all the creatures, objects, people, and spirits which pertain to it. Moreover, it "cuts through" the very Dreamings, thereby disrupting, on an ontological level, a fundamental aspect of the ontology and identity of Aboriginal peoples and all other members of the land.

To most non-Aboriginals, this narrative is difficult to grasp. Or, it appears grounded in cultural beliefs which are to be respected, but seem at odds with a scientific appraisal of objective reality. The notion of Dreaming, or of sentient land to which one has direct obligations, seems 'animistic,' mythological, and spiritual. On the basis of an ontological reorientation like the one described in the foregoing chapters, however, one might see how the Aboriginal experience of the destruction of the Juukan Gorge may be expressed in terms more familiar to or consistent with Western philosophy. A different ontological starting point thus illuminates a different view of what was morally at issue in this situation. The harm done was relational, in that it affected the very landscape through which the PKKP peoples and their human and nonhuman relatives, from the past, present and future, are mutually constituted. The cave can be understood as an agentive being whose existence was an integral part of the identity of the Country, and who directly influenced the Dreaming which connects and shapes the identities of members of the community. Failure to protect the landscape was, furthermore, experienced as a "sense of failed responsibility," since one's connection to the land also involves a responsibility to care for it.

An ontological reorientation of both human identity and matter, wherein identity, life, agency, and material place are understood as mutually co-constitutive and existing in a reciprocal relationship with each other, reveals moral dimensions of something like the destruction of the Juukan Gorge which are not usually apparent to the Western observer. It is not merely an (anthropocentric) matter of sentiment, or rights to cultural and religious self-determination, but rather a matter of identity. And, perhaps, developing such an attunement to place and matter in Western contexts would radically change the way we structure our daily lives, construct our houses, consume products, and otherwise understand and interact with the world around us.

Conclusion

This thesis examined the question how we should understand our moral relationship with inanimate objects and matter. I sought to defend four claims. First, that traditional Western environmental ethical theories are based upon normative and ontological dualism, which leads us to conceive of inanimate matter as lacking inherent worth. Second, that this disregard for matter negatively influences our ecological behaviors. Third, that common alternatives to the traditional ethical approaches, namely holist views and deep ecology, challenge some of the traditional theories' main assumptions but nevertheless fail to depart their underlying dualisms. Fourth, that new materialist, ecofeminist, and Indigenous scholarship can offer insights which might enable us to conceive of inanimate matter as mattering inherently.

To make these claims I first outlined traditional Western theories of moral status and environmental ethics, namely individualist utilitarian and deontological views, which can be categorized as either sentience- or life-based, and hierarchical or egalitarian, and argued that none of these enable a view of inanimate objects and matter as possessing inherent worth. In Chapter 2, I drew on Kureethadam's analysis of Descartes' influence on the modern worldview, and argued that the traditional ethical approaches discussed in Chapter 1 are predicated upon lingering Cartesian substance dualism and a broader schema of normative dualisms. In Chapter 3, I considered whether commonly discussed alternatives to the standard Western ethical theories, namely holist and deep ecological views, can provide grounds for moral consideration of inanimate objects. Although both schools reject certain dualisms, and although deep ecology has an explicitly ontological orientation, I concluded that they do not depart sufficiently from the dualisms which underlie the common view of matter as morally dead. I argued that an environmental ethic wanting to conceive of matter as morally considerable ultimately requires a non-dual understanding of human identity, and of the physical world. In Chapter 4 I discussed how insights from 'new' materialisms, ecofeminism, and Indigenous scholarship can contribute to an alternative understanding of humans and nonhuman matter, which departs from the ontological and normative dualisms problematized in Chapters 2 and 3. In particular, I discussed 'new' materialisms proposed by Barad (2007), Ingold (2010) and Coole (2017). I noted that, given the relative newness of the field, significant debates - particularly on the nature of agency understood as a corporeal, material phenomenon - still need resolving. Nevertheless, I argued, the field of new materialism

demonstrates that alternative ontological frameworks are emerging out of a dissatisfaction with the limits of current ontological, political, and ethical frameworks, and that they may inspire radically different ways of seeing, being in, and relating to the material world. I also discussed a virtue-based account of human identity, proposed by Plumwood as an alternative to the deep ecological conception of Self, and argued that it is compatible with a relational, new materialist ontology like Barad's 'agentive realism' (2007).

I noted the potential concern that even if one conceives of inanimate objects or matter as possessing agency, the ethical significance of such a move remains unclear since objects would still lack interests, sentience, or a preference for certain states of being over others. Although a clear answer to this concern is beyond the scope of this thesis, and possibly even beyond the current insights of Western academia, I noted that an ontological reorientation of humans, matter, and their inextricable relationality already represents a significant departure from the current status quo. A greater attentiveness to relationality and matter's reciprocal activity may inspire a firmer appreciation of the web of relations within which we exist, and thus a greater attunement to the consequences of our interactions with the material and natural world. I furthermore noted that Indigenous scholarship may offer valuable insights in this regard because it presents a rich tradition of agentive ontologies, and that Indigenous lifeways exemplify how these agent ontologies may be put into practice through coherent, relational ethical approaches grounded in reciprocal relationships with nonhuman moral interlocutors. Finally, I discussed how these insights might change our understanding of what is at stake in situations like the destruction of the Juukan Gorge, a site of significant spiritual and cultural importance to the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura Peoples of Pilbara, Western Australia.

Ultimately, the answer to the question how we should understand our moral relationship with inanimate natural object remains unanswered. However, my aim has been to demonstrate that seeking an answer to this question ought to involve a critical reappraisal of the ontological frameworks which delineate the logical limits of the ethical theories built upon them. I suggest, however, that a more relational understanding of human interactions with the natural world, as well as a more corporeal or material basis for human identity, and a more active and agentive notion of matter, may contribute to a more ecologically responsible way of existing in the world. A provisional answer, then, is that we should consider our relationship to inanimate others as yet undefined, but morally significant.

In light of this, I suggest that cross-cultural engagement with Indigenous scholarship is an important area for future ethical inquiry. Such engagement could enrich further development of 'new' materialisms and research into how agentive ontologies may be translated into environmental ethics philosophies. Another important area for research relates to the nature of material, nonhuman agency; whether it indeed exists, and how much further beyond humans and similar entities it can be extended. Finally, the question of what the implications such agency might be for our moral obligations to the inanimate objects and assemblages in our immediate surroundings, and on a more global scale, is an intriguing area for future research.

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