

# Why should we address the climate crisis?

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## *Abstract*

As a species, we have a firmly embedded attachment to seeing ourselves as ‘apart from’ and ‘superior to’ the natural world. This can prevent us from seeing any intrinsic value in other animals, plant life, rivers, the ocean, the soil, entire ecosystems, and so on. It gives us ‘permission’ to see them instead as being of value only insofar as they serve *our* interests and goals. This perspective cannot help but affect our motivation to address the climate crisis. If we do not feel any moral concern for beings other than ourselves, then we will only act to prevent climate change when *we* are affected in a sufficiently serious way. The problem is that by then, it will be too late for the planet. If this is right, then widening our ethical concern to include non-human species and ecosystems could unlock the energy and motivation needed to address the climate crisis.

## 1. A MORAL QUESTION

There are powerful drivers that lie behind our reluctance to address the climate emergency.<sup>1</sup> One of the most important is the astonishingly short-sighted selfishness and greed of the political and financial elite, who seem hell-bent on stripping the Titanic bare as she sinks and trashing all the lifeboats for good measure. Good people are, for this reason, pouring their energy into addressing the systemic corruption, incompetence and ignorance that is enabling this elite to hold onto power. But as important as this is, we also need to focus our attention on a different kind of driver: namely, the reasons that we appeal to when we are trying to make the case for addressing climate change. In particular, I think a moral question can be raised about what is perhaps the most common motivation for addressing the climate emergency: that is, *our desire to minimise the threat that it poses to ourselves, to our loved ones, and to humanity at large.*

<sup>1</sup> When I refer to ‘we’ and ‘our’ in this paper, I do not mean literally *everyone*—or at least not all the time, and not always consciously or deliberately. But in the context of a discussion about the climate crisis, the collective responsibility implied by such generalisations seems appropriate. There are many individuals and groups who are doing outstanding work to address the climate crisis. But as they would themselves acknowledge, there are not (yet) enough exceptions to disprove the rule.

This motivation might seem harmless on the face of it. We might even wish that more people were kept up at night thinking about this kind of threat. But it is this very motivation that could help to explain why there is still so much resistance to the large-scale economic, industrial, and behavioural changes that will be necessary to slow down, if not reverse the sixth mass extinction.<sup>1</sup> The key problem with this motivation is that it rests on a (largely unspoken) assumption about who or what we are willing to include within our circle of ethical concern. In other words, it takes a particular stand on the kind of beings on this planet that we should care about or feel responsible for.

But this is surely an open question. It makes perfect sense to ask whether it would be wrong to cause unnecessary harm to a non-human being. Again, we might ask whether we have a moral responsibility to protect, if not promote the well-being or flourishing of beings other than ourselves. There is nothing wrong with the claim that we ought to protect ‘ourselves, our loved ones, and humanity at large’. But it does seem, if only implicitly, to draw the ethical boundary around one particular species. Why stop there? Why not include other sentient creatures? For that matter, why not extend the circle so as to include non-sentient beings, such as plants, or the soil, or the oceans, or even entire ecosystems? On what basis can we justify limiting the boundaries of our ethical concern to human beings?

These are difficult questions, of course. And it would take a few tomes even to begin answering them. I will suggest one possible approach later, but the main issue I want to focus on this paper is this: *What impact does the way in which we draw the boundary of our ethical concern have on our willingness to address the climate crisis?* Most people tend to include only other humans in the circle, with the possible exception of family pets. More and more are starting to widen the circle to include other sentient beings, hence the rapid rise of plant-based diets and products. But what difference would it make if, as a species, we were to include *every* other being on this planet: not only other sentient creatures, but also plants, the land, rivers, oceans, and entire ecosystems? Could such a radical expansion potentially unlock the energy and motivation needed to solve the climate crisis? If so, that would give us a powerful reason to take this ethical perspective far more seriously than we have to date. We would be more than justified in drawing upon every normative resource available to us—philosophical, political, educational, artistic, religious—to make this radically inclusive extension more plausible and persuasive to the widest possible spectrum of people, belief systems and cultures.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ripple W. J., et. al. (2017). World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice. *BioScience*. 67 (12): pp. 1026-28; Ceballos, G. and Ehrlich, P. R. (8 June 2018). The misunderstood sixth mass extinction. *Science*. 360 (6393): pp. 1080-81.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. “I consider therefore the following opinion as most correct according to the teaching of the Bible, and best in accordance with the results of philosophy; namely, that the Universe does not exist for man’s sake, but that each being exists for its own sake, and not because of some other thing.” Maimonides, M. (1904). *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Friedländer: Book. 13.

## 2. HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM

We all accept that we are, in some sense, a part of the natural world. Like other animals, we are ‘programmed’ with the four primal drives or instincts (otherwise known as the four ‘Fs’): fighting, fleeing, feeding, etc. We are even beginning to recognise our inescapable dependency on the natural world. Science has shown that we are embedded within a finely calibrated ecosystem, without which we cannot survive. But even with all the evidence that we are deeply interwoven into the fabric of nature, we still find it incredibly hard not to think of ourselves as somehow ‘outside’ or ‘above’ this world. We can’t help but feel that we are, in some sense, ‘exceptional’ or situated on a ‘higher rung’ of being, at least in comparison to everything else on the planet. After all, no other species is capable of higher-order reasoning, morality, mathematics, science, government, music, art, religion, architecture, technology, and so on.

How would thinking of ourselves in this way be connected to the climate emergency? Why would this deep-seated sense of our exceptional status as a species prevent us from seeing the harm we are inflicting on non-human beings as a moral issue—indeed, the most important and urgent issue of our time? The reason is this: it is only a short step from seeing ourselves as ‘superior’ or ‘special’ to putting our needs and interests above those of any other being that happens to share this planet with us. As the ‘pinnacle’ of all creation, we mistakenly infer that *everything else on this planet is here for us*. Whenever there is a competition between our interests and the survival of some other species or ecosystem, *we always come first*. Even worse, we take it that this is how things ought to be. When it comes to the spotlight of moral concern, we light ourselves up like a Christmas tree and leave everything else in the dark.

The reason why this self-focus is a problem is that it infects our *motivation* for addressing the climate crisis: it severely limits the extent to which we are prepared to sacrifice our own needs and interests. What draws virtually all our ethical attention is the fact that *humankind* is hurtling down a one-way track towards its own suicidal demise. It is the looming threat *to us* that drives our moral outrage and our growing anxiety and frustration. Self-interest is what motivates our protest movements, our activism, and our burning desire for radical change. The fact that our behaviour will also choke out the life of virtually every other species and entire eco-systems is only of moral interest *to the extent that this destruction might affect us*.

Yes, there are cases in which we have been willing to ‘compromise’ to save another species or ecosystems. But these apparently ‘benevolent’ decisions are, at bottom, almost always due to the cost-benefit ratio being in our favour. Over 28,000 species are currently threatened with extinction.<sup>1</sup> But we invest far more of our time

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/planet-earth/forests-and-deserts/species-extinction-rate/story>

and resources on ‘save the whale’ campaigns, and the like. Why? Because *we* happen to think that whales are beautiful, majestic creatures. Because whales are of no obvious threat *to us*. Because killing them does not satisfy any of *our* needs or interests. Because *we* would feel devastated if they were to go extinct. Yet, when whale carcasses *are* ‘useful’ to us, such campaigns suddenly lose all their moral traction. We simply hide our butchery with transparently thin layers of rationalisation and hand-waving distractions.

This ethical self-orientation would seem to go a long way toward explaining why we are facing a sixth mass extinction. Most of the species and ecosystems that are vanishing from our planet are effectively invisible to us. They could disappear entirely without our even realising it, other than in an abstract arithmetical way. Their eradication does not register as having any immediate impact on our well-being. The problem is that it is only when *we* are being harmed that our sense of moral concern seems to kick in. It’s not just that we don’t feel *motivated* to do anything to stop the extinction. We don’t even feel that we *ought* to do so. Thousands upon thousands of species—which took millions of years to evolve—will soon vanish from our world forever, and at a rate which far exceeds the normal evolutionary pattern. But this fact will only disturb our conscience if we discover that *our* needs and interests might suffer as a result. Otherwise, this holocaust of living creatures will not even register as a blip on our ethical radar. We don’t care, so they don’t matter.

### 3. THE APPEAL TO SELF-INTEREST

It might be argued that, if this is how our moral psychology works, then we need to work with it, rather than try to change it. We need to be realistic. For the vast majority of human beings, the circle of their ethical concern only includes other human beings. So we have no choice if we want to address the climate crisis. We just need to get everyone to realise that, according to the best science available, climate change poses a serious threat to all *human* life.<sup>1</sup>

But there are two problems with this view. The first is that it prioritises expediency over morality. It is like an abolitionist arguing as follows: ‘Slaves are human beings with intrinsic value. Hence, they should not be treated as mere means to our ends, but as ends in themselves. *This* is the reason why they should be freed from slavery. Unfortunately, there are not enough people at present who believe that slaves have intrinsic value. So this argument is unlikely to have any impact on the general policy of slavery. And we cannot wait until enough people are convinced that slavery is morally wrong. Freeing the slaves is a matter of urgency. So we need

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nussbaum, M. (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard University Press: pp. 164-65.

instead to make sure that it is no longer in the slave-owners' self-interest to continue this practice, for instance by putting in place economic or legal barriers that they cannot avoid.'

Now there is no inherent problem with making it harder for people to do the wrong thing. This is, after all, why we have a criminal justice system (at least in theory). But there is always a knock-on effect when we do not put as much, if not more energy into moral persuasion. People might not be able to keep slaves for legal reasons. But if the rationale that gave them 'moral permission' to do so remains uncontested, then they will continue to treat people of another colour with as much contempt as they can get away with. Likewise, we can set up as many environmental regulations and economic disincentives as we like. But if people still see other animals, plants, the soil, rivers, and ecosystems as having no value in and of themselves, then they will happily consume, poison, and destroy them all, *right up to the legal limits* (and beyond, if they are well-connected or wealthy enough). There will never be sufficient regulatory coverage, monitoring capacity, or legal power to keep the biggest polluters in check. If people are not persuaded to do the right thing *because it is the right thing to do*, they will always find a way of getting around whatever barriers or penalties are put in their way.<sup>1</sup>

This brings us to the second problem with relying upon an appeal to self-interest. However 'realistic' this approach might seem, the fact is that, in reality, it is not working—or at least not nearly as well as it needs to. One major reason, as already noted, is that a tiny elite are profiting from the status quo. These are the 'environmental slave-owners', as it were. They have the most to lose, and so are doing everything they can to deny or minimise the climate crisis. Moreover, these same individuals currently have the power to set the rules, or at least to circumvent them. Whilst ever they hold the reins, they will relentlessly undercut any economic or legal challenges to their own interests.

There is another, equally important reason why anthropocentric arguments are not working. Even if we could convince every living person about the reality of the climate crisis, a second insurmountable problem would remain. Human beings will, in general, only take action to prevent a threat if it is immediate and unavoidable. Suppose a life-destroying asteroid was hurtling toward the earth, giving us three weeks' notice. There is little doubt that the world's governments would immediately pull together to find a solution. Yet the consequences of climate change will be just as catastrophic. So why are we not responding as we would if it were an asteroid? Because the damage is unfolding too slowly for the human mind to *experience* it as the emergency that it is. Climate change is not occurring with either the suddenness

<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Such is the nature of the understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force. . . . It is only light and evidence that can work a change in men's opinions; and that light can in no manner proceed from corporal sufferings, or any other outward penalties." Locke, J. (1963). *A Letter concerning Toleration*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

or the ‘in-your-face’ certainty that would normally trigger our flight-or-fight instincts. We swing into action when cyclones, droughts, and bushfires slam into our consciousness. But they feel to us like isolated anomalies, rather than evidence that we are living in a slow-motion global crisis. They come and go, fading away as soon as the news cycle moves on to a new, entirely unconnected disaster. The way in which the climate crisis is revealing itself in our day-to-day lives cannot compete with the horrifying urgency of an asteroid tearing through space toward us, threatening to exterminate all life on our planet.

As a result, our governments can get away with playing ‘distract, deny and delay’ politics. They pretend to put in place ‘solutions’, but these are all (directly or indirectly) designed to serve the interests of their largest donors—namely, those industries which have the most to lose from addressing the climate crisis. They weasel out of their commitments with dishonest excuses and false accounting. Or they distract us with the false hope of technological solutions: geoengineering, repurposed biomass for fuel, GMO crops, artificial meat, another earth-like planet we could colonise, and so on. Essentially, their game plan is to ‘make hay while the sun shines’. And, no doubt, somewhere in the shadowy recesses of their minds, they imagine an ‘escape hatch’ for themselves and their loved ones: ‘If it gets too hot, we can move north.’ ‘If it floods, we can move inland.’<sup>1</sup> ‘If there’s an ice-age, we can ski to work.’ ‘If the state collapses, we can fly a private jet to New Zealand.’ ‘Whatever happens, there is sure to be a tidy profit.’ But here is the point: Can we seriously imagine that our governments would use ‘distract, deny and delay’ strategies if we had three weeks to deal with a planet-destroying asteroid? Would we let them? Suppose there was an election in a week’s time. Would we vote for the party that effectively promised to do nothing to stop the asteroid, because the cost might damage our investment portfolios?

In short, if our strategy is to shock the conscience of the world into taking action by using science to demonstrate that humanity is at risk of extinction, it will not work. And for good reason. This approach rests on the assumption that the natural world is only valuable to the extent that human beings value it: the decimation of other species and ecosystems need be of no moral concern *except insofar as it might affect us*. This is a strategy that, at its best, will only motivate us to save our parks and gardens, a few world heritage spots, some cuddly koalas, and the like—in other words, whatever parts of nature that make *us* feel happier or healthier. After all, if human beings can survive quite comfortably on an otherwise degraded wasteland of a planet, then why not? If the planet is here *for us*, if it has no inherent value of its own, then we are morally entitled to treat it accordingly.

<sup>1</sup> It would be remiss not to mention the clip in which Ben Shapiro responds to the prospect of low-lying coastal areas being 10 feet underwater by arguing: “Do you think that people aren’t going to just sell their homes and move?”—to which the only conceivable return was: “Sell their houses to who, Ben? F-ing Aqua-man?” [twitter.com/i/status/1349466271226736641](https://twitter.com/i/status/1349466271226736641)

An analogy may help to clarify the problem here. Suppose an alien race arrived on our planet. They happen to be far smarter than any of us. They have worked out time-travel, dark matter, the hard problem of consciousness, and they have abolished social media. Their artistic endeavours and their music-making make all our efforts seem like chicken scratches and frogs croaking at the moon (or so it seems to them). Would this give the aliens the right to bulldoze our cities for agriculture, contaminate our drinking water, force women to express milk for their breakfast cereal, strip off our skin for their shoes, eat our children, and then leave behind a lifeless desert, piled up with their stinking refuse? Yet here we are, doing precisely the same, and with the same suite of excuses. We are in the early stages of an unspeakable holocaust that will sweep into its death-grip billions of ‘inferior’ life-forms that had the misfortune to share this beautiful planet with us. And we only give a shit because we cannot maintain the slaughter and get away with it. We are like the contemptible concentration camp guards who, realising the war was lost, tried to ‘buddy up’ to the prisoners, pretending that they were ‘nice guys’ after all.

We will not effectively address the climate crisis by appealing to the same self-orientated point of view that landed us in this catastrophic situation in the first place. We have tried this approach, and it isn’t working. It cannot overcome the fact that climate change is not yet hurting us enough—at least not those of us who live in countries that are sufficiently wealthy or powerful to do something about it. Of course, if we continue down this track, the climate crisis will eventually wipe us all out. Sci-fi fantasies aside, the ecosystems that we rely on will, one day, collapse. The impact of climate change on our own species will, at long last, be seen for the existential threat that it is. At *that* point, the anthropocentric argument will finally kick in, and we will be overwhelmed by the moral urgency of doing something to prevent the annihilation of everyone we care about, along with the human race as a whole. But by then, it will be too late.

#### 4. THE GIFT OF BEING

Some may have dismissed from the outset the possibility that non-human beings might have intrinsic value or worth. As I mentioned above, this paper is not intended as a response to this kind of skepticism. Rather it is to show that if such a radically inclusive ethical perspective were to become far more widely accepted, that could potentially ignite the energy and motivation needed to address the climate crisis. But it may nevertheless be worth making a preliminary and tentative suggestion as to what one such response might look like.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Many philosophers, theologians and environmental activists have, of course, already taken important and valuable steps in this direction, as can be seen in the works and movements that go by the names of ‘ecocentrism’, ‘deep ecology’, ‘earth-centered ethics’, ‘ecotheology’, and so on. For a useful resource, see <https://www.ecocentricalliance.org>.

We humans have something in common with everything else in the universe, whether it is sentient or inanimate. From galaxies right down to quarks, everything that inhabits this present moment shares the astonishing gift of *being*. They have all somehow managed to exist. Each thing is now a participant in reality. We are one of the incalculable number of beings that have won the ontological lottery. Moreover, nothing that actually exists has more existence *per se* than anything else. Unlike time or space, existence does not come in degrees or quantities. Things either exist or they don't. Actuality is an on-off switch, not a scale from one to ten. The kind of being that we call 'human' is, in this respect, no different from the being of any other kind. Being is the great leveller. There can be no favouritism, bragging rights or 'pecking order' in a club where mere existence is the only qualification for membership.<sup>1</sup>

These facts about our existence raise an important moral question: How could it be permissible for one kind of being—say, the 'human' kind—to destroy the being of another kind? Is it just a matter of 'might makes right'? We have the power to wipe out another species, and it's not in our interests to protect them—so that makes it okay? How would this be any different to the colonising alien race that we imagined earlier? Or take the Vogon spaceship Captain in the *Hitchhikers Guide*. He demolishes the entire earth simply because it is in the way of a 'hyperspace express route'. And he has no sympathy for the earthlings because they couldn't be bothered to lodge a complaint at their 'local planning office' in Alpha Centauri.<sup>2</sup> Scientists tell us that over one million species will go extinct in the coming decades.<sup>3</sup> But have we not given fair warning to all those frogs, birds, stingrays, butterflies, coral reefs, monkeys, dolphins, and ecosystems? If they are so apathetic that they couldn't be bothered to register a formal complaint, then why should we, like the Vogon Captain, have any sympathy?

I am not suggesting here that other beings have more right to existence than we do, or that we are not entitled to protect ourselves from annihilation. But why should we think that it is morally acceptable to take more than we need, especially when doing so comes at the expense of other beings?<sup>4</sup> For instance, we have known, for some time now, that human beings can easily survive without eating other animals. So why do we still breed and consume cows, chickens, fish, and sheep at industrial scale? Do these creatures have no independent worth or value of their own? Is it

<sup>1</sup> This is not the same as what is sometimes called 'existence value', which is the benefit that human beings get from knowing that some species or ecosystem exists. Such a value is obviously anthropocentric.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WV\\_w6oT7oJ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WV_w6oT7oJ8)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements\\_of\\_biodiversity/extinction\\_crisis/](https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis/)

<sup>4</sup> It might be argued here that it is not mere *existence* that gives a (living) being its intrinsic value, but rather its *quality of life*. See, e.g., Attfeld, R. (1998). Existence value and intrinsic value. *Ecological Economics*. 24. 163-168: p. 164b. But this confuses intrinsic value with acquired value. Even if I thought that I had lost the qualities that made life worth living, I would still have intrinsic value, since this kind of value can never be diminished, or removed. What I have lost, then, is acquired value, which can come and go, or increase and decrease, depending on my circumstances. For more on this distinction, see Brookes, D. (2019). *Beyond Harm: Toward Justice, Healing and Peace*. Sydney, Australia: Relational Approaches: p. 15ff.



really acceptable for us to extinguish their lives, let alone in such unspeakable numbers, merely to satisfy our taste-bud preferences?

Or again, if we dumped our trash in the neighbour's front yard, we would be in a whirlwind of trouble. But most of us just wouldn't do that sort of thing. And not just because we would be unlikely to get away with it. We wouldn't do it out of respect for our neighbour. Yet, we have been dumping our refuse in rivers and oceans for centuries, without giving one thought to the effect this might have on their inhabitants and the ecosystems upon which they depend. It is only recently that this practice has come to our attention as a matter of moral urgency and political activism. Why? *Because it is starting to affect us.*

In short, it does look very much like we are assuming, without justification, that the human species is perched on the top rung of a hierarchical 'Chain of Being', and that every other species is positioned so far below us that their only real purpose—the only value that their existence could possibly have—is to serve our needs and interests. Do they provide us with food, income, shelter, status, pleasure, health, companionship, or aesthetic delight? If not, then they simply do not count.

We did not always think this way. There were ancient peoples who did see the inherent worth of other creatures and of the land itself. Many of their descendants still do. They would never take more than they needed from the earth. They would always allow time for the land to renew itself and for the herd to replenish. Even when they took the life of an animal for food, they would perform rituals to honour and thank the spirit of the animal. We need only compare this practice to the industrialised butchery of over 150 billion animals each year, to see how far removed we are from this view.<sup>1</sup>

## 5. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

So what can we do? We still need to tear down the political and systemic walls that are blocking the way forward. We must rapidly design and implement new economic paradigms, social systems, energy sources and agricultural practices that will enable us to live in an ecologically sustainable way. But we also need to reconsider whether we have been right to focus the moral spotlight so exclusively on the threat that the climate crisis poses to our own kind.

The moral progress of humanity has always been measured by the steps it has taken to expand the circle of its ethical concern. We rightly honour and celebrate when women are given the vote, when slaves are freed, when it becomes illegal to discriminate against other races and religions, or when homosexuality is no longer criminalised. We have a long way to go, of course. Even today, whole countries are

<sup>1</sup> <http://thevegancalculator.com/animal-slaughter/>

convulsing over the continuing systemic violence and discrimination against minorities. The protests have one purpose: to rectify this cruel injustice and make sure that every human being—no matter what their race, colour or creed happens to be—is recognised and treated as having equal inherent worth.

But now, at this most tenuous, existence-threatening moment in the history of this planet, could it not be that humanity needs to take an even more radical and far-reaching moral step forward? Do we need to expand the circle of our ethical concern so that it includes *every* being on this planet—all the other species (plant and animal), the land itself, the oceans and rivers, and the very air we breathe? Space-ship Earth is our home. But it is not ours alone. There are countless other precious and irreplaceable beings that share this planet. What would happen if, as a species, we came to see the natural world as being with us, rather than for us?

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## *Appendix*

There are a number of important questions that I have not addressed in the body of this paper, largely because I thought they might have distracted from the main point. I also felt that others had already provided far better responses than I ever could. Having said this, I also take the view that we need ‘many paths up the mountain’, and the more the better. So I thought it might be worth sketching out some of my own responses, such as they are, in this Appendix.<sup>1</sup>

### *1. The consequences of transitioning to a plant-based diet*

I argued above that we have no justification for continuing to eat other animals, given that human beings can survive and flourish on a plant-based diet. But there will, of course, be significant knock-on effects if this policy were ever to be taken up on a global scale. And some of these consequences appear, at first glance, to be incompatible with the view that every being has intrinsic value. For example, we all stopped eating beef. There would be many cows ‘left over’ that had not yet been slaughtered for food. What should happen to them? And given that beef cattle are not a naturally occurring breed, would they not go extinct over time? How would that outcome be consistent with the view that every life has inherent worth?

The first point to make here is that any global transition to a plant-based diet is very unlikely to occur overnight. A radical change of this kind would almost certainly take many years, if not decades. In such a case, the most ethical way of treating any cows that were no longer needed for food or dairy would be to ensure that they were able to live the remainder of their natural lives in comfort. Even so, it is still worth considering the implications of a more rapid transition. There are now over a billion cows in the world. It is unlikely that there would be enough economic support to allow anything like this number to live out the remainder of their natural lives—let alone do to so in comfort. In other words, most of these cows would need to be killed or allowed to die. Would this not be problematic for those who think that the life of every cow has inherent value?

I don’t think so. As things stand, roughly a billion cows are killed each year. So if the beef industry collapsed, then killing the remaining cows would result in approximately the same number of deaths as would have been the case if the industry had continued. But once this ‘final cull’ had been completed, then the number of cattle that came into existence would, from that point onward, plummet—as would, of course, the subsequent death-rate of cows. In other words, roughly a billion cows would no longer be slaughtered each year—a number which

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to a reader of an earlier version of this paper for the first three questions.

would obviously accumulate over time. That is hardly a ‘problematic’ outcome for those who take the view that every life has inherent value.

This brings us to the second question: If we were to stop eating beef, then we would thereby prevent billions of cows from coming into existence. But if each cow has inherent value, wouldn’t we be causing these cows harm by preventing them from coming into existence? We wouldn’t, because we can’t. For something to be harmed or wronged, it must exist. We would be in deep ethical strife if beings that do not—and never will—exist could be harmed or wronged.

On the other hand, would there not be considerably less value in the world if we prevented these billions of cows from coming into existence? In one sense, this is undeniable. However, a thing’s coming into existence is not inconsequential. It will have an effect—good or bad—on both the thing itself and the things that are already in existence. Consider the cows themselves. The majority of cows that are intensively farmed for food or other products will live their lives under conditions of cruelty and maltreatment. So even if the life of a cow has inherent value, it would still have been better *for the cow* if it had never come into existence. Put another way, it would be morally unconscionable for us to bring a cow into existence, knowing that it is virtually guaranteed to live a life of unnecessary pain and suffering. (This wrong would only be committed against the cow *once it exists*, so we are not landing ourselves in the same ‘strife’ mentioned earlier).

But the cow is not the only being that will suffer if it is brought into existence. Breeding and slaughtering around one billion cows per year is causing catastrophic harm to the environment, and so is detrimentally impacting the lives of virtually every other living being, as well as entire ecosystems. Hence, even if the cows were to live relatively pain-free and contented lives prior to their slaughter, this does not mean that bringing them into existence would be morally justified. Increasing the number of inherently valuable beings in the world is not automatically a good thing, since doing so may come at the expense of other beings who are of equal value.

## 2. *The ethics of ‘humane’ farming*

In my response above, I claimed that, for most cows, it would have been better *for them* if they had not lived. It might, however, be argued that it is possible to rear animals in such a way as to raise a significant doubt about this claim. There is a stark ethical difference between standard factory farming and the ‘humane’, even ‘loving’ way with which some farmers treat their livestock. I fully accept this distinction. My claim was focused on *intensively farmed* cattle, not the exceptions to the rule that can often be found on smaller farms.

Having said this, most ‘humane’ farms still slaughter their livestock for food and other products. They would not be rearing them otherwise. So I think it is worth exploring the apparent incongruity between treating animals ‘humanely’ when the ultimate reason for keeping them at all is to kill them and use their carcasses for some form of human consumption.

An analogy may help to uncover some of the ethical issues here. Suppose an alien race took over the planet and started farming us for their ‘meat requirements’. Most of the alien farmers turn out to be brutally cruel. They keep us caged in obscene, degrading conditions until we reach the optimal age for eating. But there are a few exceptions. Some of the aliens treat their captives ‘humanely’. But even so, when their human livestock reach the optimal age for consumption, they are also killed and eaten. Worst of all, these aliens have plenty of alternative food sources, and so consuming human beings is strictly unnecessary for their survival. They just prefer the taste of humans to the other options.

Most of us would accept that the aliens who use ‘humane’ farming methods are, in *that* respect, ethically superior to those who use factory farming. But surely, we would not want to say that their use of ‘humane’ methods somehow cancels out or redeems the fact that they go on to kill and eat their human livestock, especially when they do so merely to satisfy their taste-buds. But if that is how we see it, then it would be inconsistent not to hold a similar ethical view of our own ‘humane’ farming methods. ‘Humane’ farming may be ethically superior to factory farming, but that does not cancel out or redeem the fact that it involves the *unnecessary* killing of a being that has equal inherent value and worth. In short, ‘humane’ farming for meat-consumption is, on this perspective, an ethical self-contradiction.

### 3. *The competing interests of species vs individuals*

Suppose there are only two locations in which we can build a new town. If we do so at one location, this will wipe out the last breeding pair of black rhinos. But it will also guarantee the long-term survival of a large wild population of white rhinos. If we build the town in the second location, both species would survive, but many of white rhinos will die as a consequence. How do we decide between these alternatives if each rhino has inherent worth or value?

The first point to make here is that intrinsic value does not come in degrees. It is equally distributed. That is why I think this kind of value is most plausibly grounded in being *per se*, rather than in a being’s qualities or capacities (such as sentience or the capacity to suffer), which are always unevenly distributed. So, on the assumption that every being has inherent worth just by virtue of existing, it will follow that one species cannot have more intrinsic value than another. Hence, the fact that one

animal belongs to a particular species—even if it is endangered—does not give it any more intrinsic value than an animal that belongs to a non-endangered species. All species are on an equal footing when it comes to their intrinsic value, and so should be included within our circle of ethical concern on that basis alone.

But it follows that if we are to make an *ethical* decision about whether to protect an endangered species at the expense of individual members of a non-endangered species, then we need to appeal to something *other than* intrinsic value. Here is one possibility. We could appeal to what might be called ‘natural values’—that is, those qualities that sustain or enhance the natural world as a whole (or the ‘ecosphere’), and so can be said to ‘add value’ to it. Natural values might include: uniqueness, reproducibility, the capacity to increase biodiversity or ecodiversity, ecosystem integrity, and so on. These values will be unequally distributed and measurable. Some beings will, for instance, be more unique or less destructive of biodiversity. These values are also ‘objective’ in two senses: first, a being will have one or more of these values in virtue of its natural or ‘in-built’ qualities, such as its place in an eco-system, the capacities it has gained over the course of its existence, or as a result of its evolutionary history, and so on; and second, a being can possess natural values even if we do not know that it does, or even if those values are not of any use to us.

On this account, the extinction of an endangered species would result in the loss of a significant amount of natural value: uniqueness, biodiversity, and so on. Moreover, this loss would objectively outweigh the loss of natural value that would occur if any individual from a non-endangered species were to be killed. Hence, insofar as our ethical decisions are sensitive to objective values, it follows that, absent any other options, we would have solid ethical grounds for protecting an endangered species, even at the expense of individuals from a non-endangered species.

One final point: Natural value does not cancel out or over-ride inherent value. They play very different roles. For instance, it would be a mistake to infer that individual beings (e.g., white rhinos) can be *excluded* from our circle of ethical concern until the species of which it is a member happens to be threatened with extinction, or somehow manages to increase its natural value. Acknowledging the inherent value of all beings entails accepting that *each being has an equal ‘voice’ at the table*. Every being must be given equal consideration in matters that concern their well-being. This means, in part, that even where there appear to be competing interests, we must keep doing everything within our power to find an alternative solution that preserves the lives of all concerned. Of course, when the survival of a species is at stake, it will be enormously hard to ensure that our decision is fair. Evaluating the comparative weight of natural values is no easy matter, and science will need to play a significant role. Mistakes will be made. But the perfect should not be the enemy of the good. We must do what we can, whilst always pushing against the limits of what we think is ‘impossible’.

#### 4. *When our survival is threatened by other species*

Suppose that a deadly virus emerges that has the potential to wipe out most of the human race unless we eradicate it. The view that humans are of no greater value than any other being, together with the need to prioritise biodiversity, would seem to imply that this would be the morally wrong thing to do. We should instead preserve the virus, even if at the expense of large numbers of human lives.

The dimension of free choice is critical here. A virus that threatens to kill us cannot change its behaviour at will, nor is it open to persuasion. So, given the absence of any alternative, we have the right to eradicate a deadly virus if that is the only way we can protect ourselves. We may not have *more* inherent value than other beings, but this does not mean we have *less*. On this ethical perspective, we retain the right to self-defence. But in doing so, we should recognise and honour the value that other beings have by using the least destructive or harmful means available (e.g., persuasion instead of force, containment instead of extermination, and so on).

Having said this, there are very few beings that have the capacity to threaten our existence. Our survival is not in genuine competition with the vast majority of other species on this planet. Those that can cause us significant harm very often acquire this potential because we have, at some point, excluded them from our circle of ethical concern (e.g., by eating infected animals). Human beings can change their behaviour. We have a conscience. And we can do *far* more damage than any other species. So we are in the unique position of having the capacity—and therefore the responsibility—to act in a way that honours the inherent worth of *every* being. This means not taking more than we need. It means ‘treading lightly’ as we go our way. It means inviting every being into the circle of our ethical concern, giving them all an equal ‘voice’ in our decision making.

#### 4. *Reducing the threat of overpopulation*

It is beyond doubt that the presence of human beings poses a serious threat to almost every species and ecosystem on this planet. Some have argued that the most effective solution to this crisis would be to reduce the human population.<sup>1</sup> If this is true, and if each being has inherent worth, then it looks like this proposal would be the right thing to do. But how should it be done? As Murray Bookchin notes, such a ‘solution’ could easily lead to policies that are morally abhorrent:

“I recently encountered [someone] in the United States who believes that African children—presumably like other ‘animals’—should be permitted to starve because they are ‘overpopulating’ the continent and burdening the biological ‘carrying capacity’ of their respective countries. . . . The myth that population increases in places like the Sudan, for

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Quinn, D. (1992). *Ishmael*. Bantam/Turner, New York.

example, result in famine (not the notorious fact that the Sudanese could easily feed themselves if they were not forced by the American-controlled World Bank and International Monetary Fund to grow cotton instead of grains) typically represents the kind of arguments that are gaining popularity among many environmentalists. . . . Reduced to merely one life-form among many, the poor and the impoverished either become fair game for outright extermination if they are socially expendable, or they become objects of brutal exploitation if they can be used to aggrandize the corporate world. Accordingly, terms like ‘oneness’ and a ‘biocentric democracy’ go hand-in-hand with a pious formula for human oppression, misery, and even extermination.”<sup>1</sup>

There are two possible responses to this. First, the view that all beings have inherent value straightforwardly entails that *no human being is ‘expendable’*. So, on this view, it would never be justified to treat any human as an ‘object of brutal exploitation’. Even when there is a competition between natural values, every effort should be made to preserve and protect the life of each individual being.

Second, Bookchin’s objection contains the answer to itself. The claim that African children are ‘burdening the biological carrying capacity of their respective countries’ is false, given that ‘the Sudanese could easily feed themselves if they were not forced by the American-controlled World Bank and International Monetary Fund to grow cotton instead of grains’. So there is no genuine conflict between the natural value of humans and the environment in this instance. As is so often the case, the conflict is entirely manufactured by the greed and self-interest of politicians and financial elites. Thus, any attempt to deal with overpopulation must *begin* by addressing the unequal distribution of resources from a global perspective, as well as the fact that so many of us are consuming far more than we need.

<sup>1</sup> Bookchin, M. (1989). *Remaking Society*. Black Rose Books: p. 7.