

## Dissolving the Paralyzing Dilemma in Environmental Ethics: An Appeal to Objective Reasons

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**Abstract:** Environmental ethics appears to face a dilemma: either the value of nature is entirely *instrumental* to human objectives in which case aspects of the environment which are of no use to us cannot be considered, or elements of nature have a *good of their own*, in which case no sense can be made of what such inherent value amounts to or why we should believe in it. In what follows, I offer a novel solution this ‘Paralyzing Dilemma’ for environmental ethics. To do this, I recount this dilemma and supplement it with a thought experiment to strengthen the case against the possibility of grounding an environmental ethic on instrumental value as well as a novel argument from categoricity to deductively undercut both instrumentalism and Norton’s environmental pragmatism. I then offer a novel way out by drawing on Parfit’s account of reasons, his moral rationalism, and his wide value-based objectivism. I show how an appeal to objective reasons gives us resources to escape both horns of the paralyzing dilemma in such a way as to allow for real, categorical obligations to the environment

### 1. Introduction

Environmental ethics appears to face, what has been called by some, a “paralyzing dilemma.” The dilemma is this: either (A) the value of nature is entirely *instrumental* to human objectives, or (B) Elements of nature have a *good of their own*—value not dependent on human valuations.<sup>i</sup> A dilemma arises because these options appear to be exhaustive, and there seem to be good arguments showing that neither one is acceptable. Horn (A) must be dismissed because: (i) it disallows the moral consideration of environmental entities that are of no use for humans; and since (ii) environmentalists want to place value on aspects of the environment *beyond* those that are merely useful for humans, (iii) instrumentalism about the value of the environment must be rejected. Horn (B), on the other hand, must be rejected because no sense has been made of the idea that inherent value exists in nature *entirely independently* of human evaluators. Such inherent value, in the environmental ethics literature, has either been merely stipulated without argument or described in a fashion that is deeply mysterious. Norton attempts to evade this paralyzing dilemma by disputing that (A) and (B) are really our only options. Instead, he advocates a third position, *environmental pragmatism*: an approach to environmental ethics that puts the debate about instrumental vs. inherent value aside in an effort to seek convergence on the practical matter of deciding environmental policy.<sup>ii</sup>

In what follows, I reformulate the paralyzing dilemma—strengthening it with novel arguments against both horns. I then offer a negative case against Norton’s environmental

pragmatism as a viable way out of the dilemma. Such an approach, I argue, ultimately suffers from the same problem instrumentalism does: it does not and cannot ground the kind of categoricity we need from an environmental ethic. Rather than Norton's pragmatic approach, I offer an alternative solution to the paralyzing dilemma. Specifically, I appeal to Derek Parfit's recent moral rationalist view, an account based on the objectivity of reasons. Such objective reasons, I suggest, offer a way of grounding a genuine categorical environmental ethic—one that does not reduce to problematic instrumentalism, pragmatism, or mysterious inherentism.

The plan is this. In Section 2, I recount the 'last person' thought experiment as motivation against horn (A) as well as a novel argument from categoricity against both instrumentalism and Norton's environmental pragmatism. In Section 3, I discuss horn (B), arguing that inherentists, as of yet, have not given satisfying answers to how there can be value in nature absent any human valuer, and those answers which have been given have either stipulated that such value exists without argument or tried to traverse Hume's fact/value gap in a mysterious and problematic fashion. In Section 4, I introduce Parfit's account of objective reasons and some considerations in favor of such an account over competing subjective accounts. I then say how reasons relate to morality in general and outline Parfit's wide value-based account objective reasons. In Section 5, I apply several key features of Parfit's account to the environment. And, in Section 6, I show how objective reasons allow a novel way out of the paralyzing dilemma: one which supports a categorical environmental ethic without reducing to a problematic instrumentalism or a mysterious stipulation of inherent value.

## 2. Strengthening the Paralyzing Dilemma: Arguments against Horn (A) and Environmental Pragmatism:

Consider the following thought experiment.<sup>1</sup> After miraculously surviving a (near) apocalyptic event, you find yourself to be the very last person on Earth; you know there will be no others after you are gone. Now imagine asking yourself right before you die: would be permissible to destroy all of human history's great works of art? You might think, since humans are the only creatures who can appreciate art, and there will be no more of them left after you, there is no problem with destroying the whole lot of it before you die. If this is how you feel, then you ascribe only *instrumental value* to those artworks. Why?—because absent any humans to derive

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<sup>1</sup> Originally put forth by Routley and Routley (1980), and also appealed to by Sober (1986).

beneficial experiences from them, these works of art hold no real value and may therefore be destroyed. Now imagine asking yourself a slightly different question. Would it be permissible, right before you die, to destroy the whole of the biotic environment? Here you might reason very differently. You might, for example, think that there is something that marks an important difference between artwork and the natural environment. If you think it would *not* be permissible to destroy the entire biotic environment right before you die, then you probably place some kind of *inherent value* on it. Why?—because even if there aren't any humans to benefit from the environment, there is *still* something about it that is worth protecting. It is for that reason that it would be wrong to destroy it.

The forgoing 'last person' thought experiment, like all thought experiments, is meant to tug at intuitions. Specifically, it is meant to demonstrate that the value most of us ascribe to the natural world goes *beyond* mere instrumental value. That is why, even as the last human on Earth, we think it would be wrong to destroy the entire natural world. The biotic environment, unlike the Mona Lisa and Rachmaninoff's 3<sup>rd</sup> piano concerto, is valuable on its own—irrespective of any human interaction with it. As such, the last person thought experiment takes us a few steps closer to the rejection of instrumentalism about the value of nature (horn A of the paralyzing dilemma).

But what are the prospects for a more definitive argument against instrumentalism?—one that does not rest so squarely on the mere tugging of intuitions? Here I attempt to offer such an argument: one that, if sound, deductively undercuts *both* instrumentalism about the value of nature *and* the proposed environmental pragmatism offered by Norton as an alternative to the paralyzing dilemma. I call it the *argument from ethical categoricity*. It goes as follows:

1. Whatever else an environmental ethic needs to do, it at least needs to ground some categorical obligations to the environment.
2. An environmental ethic based on instrumental value or pragmatism (without further work) cannot ground any categorical obligations to the environment.
3. Therefore, an environmental ethic based on instrumental value or pragmatism must be rejected.

To show this argument is sound, support must be offered for both of its premises. Before doing so, however, something needs to be said about what it means for the dictates of an ethic to be *categorical* as opposed to *hypothetical* (or contingent). Following Kant, I take an ethical

imperative to be categorical just in case it is “objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end”<sup>2</sup>. In other words, categorical imperatives are unconditionally binding and absolutely necessary.<sup>3</sup> If a rule is a categorical imperative, then we ought to obey it no matter what else we might will and no matter what we might have an inclination to do.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a categorical imperative holds without exception. If an action is commanded by one, then we are obligated to perform it, regardless of what any other rule might prescribe.

So why do we need our environmental ethic to contain (at least some) obligations of this sort? My answer is that we need an environmental ethic that allows for categorical obligations for the same reason we need categoricity in ethics generally. In short, the reason is this. An ethic, the dictates of which are entirely contingent on an agent’s subjective states, reduces to absurdity. Richard Joyce forcefully makes this point in his recent book *The Myth of Morality* (2007). He writes,

Just consider our moral condemnation of Nazis. Any offering along the lines of ‘Well, we wanted to create an Aryan master race, and genocide seemed like an efficient means of accomplishing it’ is no defense at all! But barring an argument that their actions were in some subtle way desire-frustrating, this shows that it is a *categorical imperative* with which we denounce them... The manner in which we condemn Nazis, ignoring any unusual desires or interest that they may have, is not a peripheral element of moral discourse; it represents a kind of reprehension that is central. A system of values in which there was no place for condemning Nazi actions simply would not count as a *moral* system.<sup>iii</sup>

Joyce’s Nazi example shows that there are some acts we condemn *no matter* the intentional states of the agents. It might well have been the case that, relative to the Nazis’ beliefs about the moral worth of the Jewish people and their intentions to make the world better, the final solution was the appropriate act for them—perhaps even the moral act. But from our standpoint, that does not (and cannot) matter. The Nazis’ final solution was morally reprehensible regardless of what they believed, intended, or understood themselves to be doing. Which is just to say: the Nazis violated a *categorical* moral imperative. If an ethic does not admit of any such categoricity, and the moral status of every act is contingent on the subjective intentional states of acting agent, then the result is that adherents of such an ethic cease to be able to condemn the Nazis. And any ethic that does not have the resources to condemn the Nazis’ final solution, Joyce concludes,

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<sup>2</sup> GMS 414

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 408

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* 416

reduces to absurdity. Thus, if we take Joyce's point seriously, it becomes evident that any system of values which we deem a *moral system*, must contain (at least some) categorical obligations: obligations that hold no matter what an agent's wants and desires happen to be. And since an environmental ethic is certainly a species of morality in general, I conclude that (at least some of) its dictates too must have categorical force. If so, premise (1) of the argument from ethical categoricity holds.

What of premise (2)? Why are instrumentalists about the value of the biotic environment incapable of grounding any categorical obligations to the environment? Before addressing this question, it will help to distinguish between two main camps of instrumentalists about the value of nature: one that takes an *economic* approach and one that takes an *aesthetic* approach.

An economic instrumentalist about the environment regards nature as a scarce resource for the good of humans: one that (like all scarce resources) should be regulated entirely by the market. In his paper, "The Ethical Basis of the Economic View of the Environment," A. Myrick Freeman III offers such an approach. He writes, "To the economist, the environment is a scarce resource which contributes to human welfare. The economic problem of the environment is a small part of the overall economic problem..."<sup>iv</sup> I argue that this approach cannot ground the kind of categoricity we need from an environmental ethic. The reason is this. If the services provided to humans by the natural environment can be rendered just as well by artificial means, the economic view has no theoretical apparatus to stop the outright destruction of the natural resources that once delivered these services. Put another way, on the economic view of the environment, all of our obligations to the natural world are *contingent* on whether they offer any economic benefit to us. If people don't want to pay for it, then it doesn't get considered. In principle, thereby, this approach would condone the destruction of the entire biotic environment—as long as the economic benefits to humans remained intact. Thus, on such an account, there can be no obligations to the environment that hold irrespective of human goals, needs, and concerns. In other words, the economic view cannot accommodate any categoricity in an environmental ethic.

An aesthetic instrumentalist maintains that the value of nature is equivalent to the value we draw from experiencing the human history's great works of art. Just as we derive a sense of awe and wonderment from observing Monet's *Impression Sunrise* or listening to one of Chopin's Nocturnes, we derive awe and wonderment from experiencing a bald eagle or the Grand Canyon.

There is no value in nature over and above such aesthetic value. This is the approach taken, for example, by Lilly-Marlene Russow when she writes, "...we value and protect animals [and other aspects of the environment] *because* of their aesthetic value"<sup>v</sup>.<sup>5</sup> My argument against the possibility of grounding a categorical environmental ethic on aesthetic value runs much the same way my argument against the economic approach did. Namely, on an aesthetic approach to the value of nature, our obligations to the natural world are entirely *contingent* on whether they appeal to us aesthetically. On such an account, there can be no obligations to the environment that hold independently of their aesthetic appeal. Since (as I've argued) we cannot accept an environmental ethic that is incapable of grounding any categorical obligations, we must also reject aesthetic instrumentalism.

Furthermore, I contend that Norton's environmental pragmatism is no better at doing the work of grounding a categorical environmental ethic. On Norton's view, the question of whether to characterize the value of nature as either inherent or instrumental is entirely misguided. Rather, he suggests following the tradition of American pragmatists Charles Sanders Pierce and John Dewey who "rejected as folly the search for certainty and deductivism in moral and social matters"<sup>vi</sup>.<sup>6</sup> Instead of searching for truth, the project of scientific inquiry and morality "must be fully characterized within human experience, not by reference to 'external objects' that exist beyond experience"<sup>vii</sup>. On a view like Norton's, I argue there is no hope for a genuine, categorical environmental ethic. Why?—because a central feature of the pragmatist approach is to reject moral truth and foundationalism. However, a categorical ethic holds the force it does precisely because it is grounded in reality, because its dictates are *truly* obligatory. Without foundational truth outside of the human mind and experience, morality reduces to subjectivism. And subjectivism, by definition, relativizes morality to human subjects. The dictates of any moral system conceived as entirely relative to the experience of human subjects must be entirely contingent on those human subjects. Thus, when Norton's pragmatism jettisons moral truth and reality, it also jettisons any hope for grounding real obligations to the natural world.

### 3. Horn (B): the Vexing Question and the Fact/Value Gap

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<sup>5</sup> This also the conclusion Sober seems to reach (1986).

<sup>6</sup> See Pierce (1955)

If my above arguments have been convincing, neither instrumentalism about environmental value nor Norton-style pragmatism can be seen to have any hope for accommodating the categoricity we need from an environmental ethic. What, we may now ask, are the prospects for an inherentist approach?

First, it will help to provide some classic examples of inherentism in environmental ethics. Aldo Leopold, author of *The Sand County Almanac* and father of conservation biology writes, “By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean *value in the philosophical sense*”<sup>viii</sup>; Paul W. Taylor, celebrated biocentrist and author of the book *Respect for Nature*, writes, “...it is the good (well-being, welfare) of individual organisms, considered as entities having *inherent worth*, that determines our moral relations with the Earth’s wild communities of life”<sup>ix</sup>; Devall and Sessions, in their seminal formulation of the environmental ethic, *Deep Ecology*, write, “The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth have *value in themselves*. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes”<sup>x</sup>.

Surely, if any approach is going to succeed in giving us real obligations to the biotic environment, it is the kind of inherentism offered above. After all, what better reason is there to act on a thing’s behalf than if that thing can be shown to have real, intrinsic value: value that is built right in? As nice as this sounds, however, an important question plagues the inherentist project. I call it the *vexing question* and put quite simply it is this: how can there exist value absent human valuers? What sense is there to be made of a thing having value with no one there to value it? Put another way: If valuing is a mental activity, and humans (quite plausibly) are the only creatures with minds, then how can value exist independently of humans? The problem with the inherentist literature, as I see it, is that either (i) inherent value is merely stipulated without argument or justification, or (ii) what *is* said about this inherent value is deeply mysterious.

Beginning with (i): as I read them, adherents to deep ecology do not adequately explain, argue for, or justify believing in the inherent value of natural objects. Devall and Sessions, for example, go into some detail about what things *have* inherent value: e.g. individuals, species, populations, habitat, human and nonhuman cultures; but when it comes to telling us what this inherent value *is* or *why* we are to believe in its existence, their account says next to nothing.

Regarding (ii), those who *do* undertake to explain or justify the inherentism to which they subscribe tend to say things that are quite strange. Take Rolston III’s mysterious claim that

“Value seeps out into the system”...<sup>xi</sup>. Seeps how? What allows human value to do this? Coherent answers to these questions simply are not given. Furthermore, defenders of inherentism often find themselves traversing Hume’s well-known fact/value gap in a fashion that is deeply unsatisfying. Leopold draws his inherentist conclusion from the “combined evidence of history and ecology”<sup>xii</sup>. J. Baird Callicott, a career-long defender of Leopold’s land ethic, argues that “The land ethic rests upon three scientific cornerstones”<sup>xiii</sup>. He cites ecology, evolutionary biology, and Copernican cosmology as *evidence* for Leopold’s summary moral maxim.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, defenders of inherentist environmental ethics often seem merely to list scientific facts—from which a moral conclusion is meant to automatically follow. Those familiar with any of 20<sup>th</sup> century metaethics, however, know that the emergence of a moral conclusion from factual premises cannot be so simple. As Humeans ubiquitously warn, you cannot derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’—at least not without further work

Thus, as it stands, we confront the paralyzing dilemma anew. Only this time it is worse. If my arguments have been convincing, our need for ethical categoricity precludes the acceptance of either an instrumentalist or a pragmatic approach to environmental ethics. And the only alternative is inherentism which, as we have seen, has either been merely stipulated or poorly justified. In what follows, however, I argue all is not lost. An appeal to objective reasons can help.

#### 4. Parfit on Reasons

In this section, I appeal to Derek Parfit’s recent moral rationalist account of objective reasons as a theoretical resource. In section 4.1, I explain what reasons are and say a little bit about why we should conceive of them as objective rather than subjective. In section 4.2, I say how reasons relate to morality in general and briefly outline Parfit’s wide value-based objectivism. This theoretical apparatus will allow us, in Section 5 and 6, to return to the topic of environmental ethics and to arrive at a new solution to the paralyzing dilemma.

##### 4.1. reasons: objective vs. subjective

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<sup>7</sup> “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (223)

Derek Parfit's recent book, *On What Matters*, opens with the sentence: "We are the animals that can both understand and respond to reasons"<sup>xiv</sup>. So what are reasons? Where do they come from? And why are they important to ethical theory? A *reason*, as Parfit has it, is simply a consideration in favor of undertaking a particular act or having a particular belief. Facts give us reasons. And when they do, those facts can be said to *be* our reasons<sup>xv</sup>. That a city bus is driving down the parkway gives me a reason to wait before crossing the street. This fact, it can equally be said, *is* my reason for waiting to cross the street.<sup>8</sup>

On Parfit's account, reasons have an intimate relationship to value. When our reasons to do something are stronger than our reasons to do any other act, these reasons are *decisive*, and this act is what we have *most reason to* do; it is what we *should, ought to, or must do*<sup>xvi</sup>. Furthermore, things can be *good or bad*—they can *have value*—by virtue of having features that give us reasons to respond to them in certain ways<sup>xvii</sup>. Pleasure is good because it has properties that give me reasons to seek it. Agony, on the other hand, has features that any reasonable person would seek to avoid; it is bad. This simple account of reasons, importantly, provides an elegant path across Hume's much-worried-about fact/value gap. On Parfit's account, as we've seen, facts both give us reasons and are those reasons. The thing we *should* do is that which we have the most reason to do. Things have value because of their reason-giving features. Thus, in a very real sense, *reasons are the bridge between fact and value*. If we take Parfit's account seriously, we *can* derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. An 'ought' is derivable from an 'is' precisely when the 'is' is reason-giving.

Despite the elegance of the above account and its advantage of providing smooth passage across the fact/value divide, there are some (perhaps many) who would dispute it. In order to see why, it is important to distinguish between *objective* and *subjective* accounts of reasons. On a *subjective theory of reasons*: we only have reason to do that which would best fulfill or achieve our present desires or aims. Reasons, on such an account, are always *subject-given*: my reasons are only those considerations that would further my desires or aims. Absent any furthering of these subjective goals, a consideration cannot be a reason for me. On an *objective theory of reasons*, on the other hand, we have reasons to act in some way only when, and because, what we are doing or trying to achieve is in some way good, or worth achieving. Facts about things in

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<sup>8</sup> I appeal to Parfit's account here because it is very recent, and I find it to be clearly articulated and well-argued for. However, I might just as well have appealed to recent work by Scanlon (2008) or Dancy (1993, 2000)—who both have similar objective reasons-based accounts.

the world, on an objective view, give me reasons whether they match up with my goals or motives or not. Reasons, on such an account, are *object-given*. Because Parfit's account of reasons characterizes facts (entirely independent of our appreciation of them) as reasons, his account should clearly be seen as objectivist. He demonstrates his allegiance to objectivism about reasons with the following statement: "Such goodness [on an objective account] would give us reasons in the way the sun gives light, 'because it's out there, shining down'. If Subjectivism is true, we must make our choices in the dark"<sup>xviii</sup>.

Parfit offers several detailed arguments for his objective view of reason over the subjectivist account.<sup>9</sup> Space limitations preclude me from treating these arguments in detail. That said, in what remains of this section, I recount a couple of examples meant to motivate the objectivist account together with a likely subjectivist reply. I then give a counter-response on behalf of the objectivist.<sup>10</sup>

Imagine you go to the doctor knowing you have an allergy to cats. But your doctor says (unbeknownst to you) that people who are allergic to cats are almost always also allergic to rabbits. So, your doctor concludes, you have reason to avoid rabbits. An objectivist about reasons would characterize the fact that cat and rabbit allergies tend to co-vary as a reason for you to avoid contact with rabbits—even before you knew it. Why?—because it is a fact about the world that makes rabbit contact (for you) something to avoid. A subjectivist, on the other hand, would have to say that you had no such reason to avoid rabbits before seeing the doctor. Why?—because, on a subjectivist account, reasons only come to exist when they match up with your subjective beliefs and desires, and your ignorance of the allergy linkage between cats and rabbits precluded you from having any such beliefs and desires. Another example: suppose you encounter an ornery bear on a nature trail. You believe (falsely) that the best course of action is to turn quickly and run away. However, in actuality, such bold movement will likely cause the bear to attack. On an objectivist account, you have reason to stay put because that is what, in fact, will keep you safe. On a subjectivist account, you have reason to run because that is the

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<sup>9</sup> One such argument is (what Parfit calls) the *Agony Argument*: (1) We all have reasons to have those desires that would be had by anyone who was fully rational. (2) Anyone who was fully rational would want to avoid all future agony. 3. Therefore, We all have a reason to want to avoid all future agony. (4) *However*, subjectivism implies that we have no such reason. (5) Therefore, subjectivism is false (84). He also launches an extensive attack on Humean accounts of rationality. See, in particular, his example of 'future Tuesday indifference' (56).

<sup>10</sup> For those who find these considerations unconvincing, the thesis of the rest of the paper should be taken as addressing the following conditional question: *if* Parfit's account of objective reasons holds, what solution might be found to the paralyzing dilemma?

course of action that connects to your subjective belief and desires states. Since acting on your subjective reason would likely result in a fatal bear mauling, however, it is difficult to imagine truly having reason to act on your (purported) subjective reason to run. The idea that we might ever have reason to do that which results in our own death is deeply counterintuitive. Given this difficulty with conceiving of ever having reason to cause our own death, we might think objectivism is the more intuitive view here.

Not so, the subjectivist might reply. It is well within the purview of the subjectivist account of reasons, after all, to include various *idealized* measures for limiting the scope of subjective reasons. It might be said, for example, that we have most reason to do whatever would best fulfill or achieve our present desires or aims *provided* we have all the relevant information and no false beliefs. A view like this would enable us to deny that you have any reason to cuddle a rabbit or run away from an ornery bear. If you would have had the relevant information and lacked any false beliefs, you would have had reason to avoid rabbits and stay put on the nature trail. Thus, by appealing to idealized conditions, it seems the subjectivist can avoid the above counterintuitive results.

This response, I suggest, has problems. Namely, when you stipulate into your subjective account the idealized conditions of having only true beliefs and all the relevant information, what you are doing is placing the locus of your reasons back onto *facts about the world* rather than your subjective states. In other words, the only way to allow for the subjective account to render the intuitive results on the allergy and ornery bear examples is to collapse back into referring to the actual states of affairs to which you should be sensitive: the facts. This is precisely what an objectivist account maintains all along. Any account of reason worthy of being called ‘subjective’ better locate the source of reasons inside the subject, and idealizing the subject’s knowledge to the point of limiting it to the relevant facts at hand, simply relocates reasons back onto the world.

#### 4.2. reasons and morality: wide value-based objectivity about reasons

Suppose we accept Parfit’s objective account of reasons. What, then, can be said about morality?

To illustrate the relationship between reasons and morality, Parfit asks us to consider two questions: (Q1) what do I have the most reason to do? And (Q2) what ought I morally to do?<sup>xix</sup>.

Parfit argues that (Q1) is more fundamental than (Q2). His argument for this can be reformulated as follows.

- (i) For morality to matter in the first place, we must have reasons to care about it; without reasons to do that which morality dictates, morality ceases to have any relevance.
- (ii) Given (i), questions about reasons are ancillary to questions about morality.
- (iii) Therefore, (Q1) is more fundamental than (Q2), and the deepest question is not what we ought morally to do—but what we have sufficient or decisive reasons to do<sup>xx</sup>.

To use an example: I might very well accept that I ought not to torture strangers for fun. But without having *reasons* to do what morality dictates, Parfit argument shows, it simply does not matter if I believe I ought not torture strangers for fun. The more fundamental question is: *why* be moral in the first place? And this question necessarily requires taking reasons into consideration.

Parfit's view, however, does not merely locate questions about morality downstream from questions about what we have reasons to do. He goes further by arguing that we *always* have decisive reason to do our duty and avoid acting wrongly. Certain states of affairs in the world are such that they give us a special kind of reason: *a moral reason*. And when this happens, those reasons are necessarily decisive; they are automatically what we should, ought to, or must do. On Parfit's view, acting on our moral reasons is always the rational act. Put another way: that which is morally required to do corresponds perfectly with that which is rational to do. This view is called *moral rationalism*. On a moral rationalist view, I do not go around torturing strangers for fun because the suffering of strangers at the hand of a fun-seeking torturer is a state of affairs that gives me a moral reason not to do it. And moral reasons, on the definition of moral rationalism, are necessarily decisive.<sup>11</sup> Thus, torturing strangers for fun is both immoral and irrational.

A significant worry arises from the kind of rationalism here espoused. Namely, nothing in the theory tells us how we are to determine *whose* well-being, in favor of which, we have most reason to act? Following Sidgwick, two approaches seem to be available: one *egoistic* and one *impartial*.<sup>12</sup> On an egoistic rationalist view, we always have the most reason to do what would

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<sup>11</sup> Once again, an adequate justification of this view requires more argument than I can undertake in this paper. That said, those interested in Parfit's many detailed arguments should look at his chapters 5, 6, and 7.

<sup>12</sup> See *The Methods of Ethics*

make things go best for ourselves (or those closest to us). On an impartial rationalist view, we always have to the most reason to do that which would make things go impartially best. To illustrate this distinction, imagine the following: you can either save yourself from some injury or save some stranger's life in a distant land. If you are an egoistic rationalist, you think that you must act so as to save yourself from injury. This is because, for an egoistic rationalist, you always have sufficient reason to do what would make things go best for you, and avoiding injury would certainly accomplish this. If you are an impartial rationalist, on the other hand, you would forgo saving yourself from injury in favor of saving the far-off stranger's life. This is because, for an impartial egoist, you always have decisive reason to do what is impartially best. And saving a life is, all things considered, the more beneficial act. The divide between these two positions leads to a set of deeply challenging questions confronting rationalists—called by Sidgwick, *the profound problem*. Between our egoistic reasons and our impartial reasons, which are we supposed to act upon? Can these different reasons even be compared? Perhaps, as Sidgwick himself thought, these egoistic and impartial reasons are truly incommensurable?

The position Parfit advocates, rather than exclusively egoist or impartialist, is (what he calls): *a wide value-based objectivism*. He writes,

When one of our two possible acts would make things go in some way that would be impartially better, but the other act would make things go better either for ourselves or for those to whom we have close ties, we often have sufficient reasons to act in either of these ways.<sup>xxi</sup>

If your choice is between saving yourself from a serious injury or saving some far-off stranger's life, according to Parfit, you have sufficient reason to do *either*. This does not, however, preclude ever getting comparative results between egoistic and impartial reasons (as Sidgwick thought). As Parfit sees it—and *this is key*—sometimes impartial or egoistic reasons can be sufficiently strong to outweigh the other and allow for definitive results. Which is just to say: though the process is often difficult and imprecise, egoistic and impartial reasons are *roughly commensurable*. Suppose, for example, that you and your family have been in a shipwreck, and you are in a life-raft with only one space remaining. You must choose between saving your daughter or some stranger, both of which are within your reach. Here you have both an egoistic reason to save your daughter and an impartial reason to save the stranger. But your egoistic reason is strong enough, in this case, to counterweigh the impartial one and allow for

definitive results in favor of saving your daughter. Additionally, to change the original example slightly, suppose that you have the choice between saving yourself from some very minor injury (like the scratching of your finger) and saving some far-off stranger's life. According to Parfit's wide value-based objectivism, the strength of your egoistic reason (to avoid some very minor injury) is relatively weak compared to the strength of your impartial reason (to save a stranger's life). In a case such as this, we can again get a definitive result, this time in favor of acting impartially.

## 5. Objective Reasons and the Environment

At this point, it may seem as if we have strayed pretty far from our initial subject matter: environmental ethics. Let me now remedy this by applying some key features of Parfit's above account to issues about the environment. It will soon become clear why each is important.

I focus on four key features of Parfit's account. (1) Facts both give us reasons and are our reasons. (2) When we have the most reason to do something (as opposed to any other thing), our reasons are decisive, and that thing is what we should, ought to, or must do. (3) Moral reasons are always decisive. (4) Egoistic and impartial reasons, though it is often difficult and imprecise, can be compared if their relative strength is sufficiently asymmetrical. Now, let us see how these features of Parfit's account relate to the environment.

First, features (1) and (2) of the Parfitian account provide a new way of explaining how scientific facts can lead to normative conclusions about the environment (a piece of explanatory work that inherentists, as we have seen, have often muddled). Facts, on a Parfitian account, can lead to normative conclusions about the environment precisely when (and because) they are reason-giving. Here are some examples. The fact that the destruction of tropical forests has led to a dramatic loss of biodiversity, we might think, both gives us a reason to prevent the further loss of tropical forests, and *is* the reason for preventing those losses. The fact that greenhouse gasses continue to get trapped in the atmosphere, causing global climate change, it may seem, is a plausible reason to find alternative sources of energy. And if it can be shown that we have *more* reason to preserve our tropical forests and prevent global climate change than we have not to do so, then we will have shown that to be what we have *the most reason to do*: what we *should, ought to, or must do*. As such, environmental ethics ceases to be the mere listing of facts followed by a moral conclusion. But it can be seen, rather, as a systematic discussion of

scientific facts as reasons for acting in one way versus another. Thus, the environmental debate becomes about what our best reasons are for action. And once these get determined, they will give rise to normative conclusions in a way that does not unfairly jump the fact/value gap.

Furthermore, we might be able to show that some of our reasons for protecting the environment are *moral*—and as stated in feature (3)—are thereby automatically decisive. An obvious candidate for a fact that constitutes a moral reason regarding the environment has to do with the *suffering of people* affected by environmental degradation. Science shows us that global climate change has led (and is leading) to increased famine in many areas. The suffering of malnourished peoples (especially children), we might think, is an objective reason to change our energy-production habits. Just like the torturing of strangers for fun, however, this state of affairs seems give us a special kind of reason: a *moral* one. And such reasons, for a moral rationalist, are decisive. Another candidate for a fact about environmental degradation that gives us a moral reason is the *suffering of non-human sentient creatures* whose habitat we are destroying for our own purposes. The suffering of sentient creatures is precisely the sort of fact, we might think, that gives us a moral reason to save these creatures and their disappearing habitat. And if such a moral reason can be shown to exist, this would provide a secure rational basis for action. Why?—because on Parfit’s account, we always have decisive reason to do our duty and avoid acting wrongly.

Now, return to the distinction between egoistic and impartial rationalism. This distinction has clear implications for environmental ethics. Specifically, our reasons for continuing to damage the biotic environment are often egoistic, and reasons for preserving or protecting it are often impartial. We often encounter decisions like whether to keep the thermostat a few degrees higher in the dog days of summer, whether to drive a car or ride a bicycle to work, or whether to spend more money on renewable energy rather than energy derived from fossil fuels. In these cases, the choice that would be immediately gratifying to you is often the one that would make things go worse for the environment. This is certainly true for businesses and corporations as well. Polluting the air and sea is often the course of action that would bring the most profit to business owners and stock holders. Getting rid of nuclear waste cheaply, while desirable for nuclear facility owners, often causes irrevocable damage to the environment and future generations. Parfit’s wide values-based objectivism about reasons, as stated in feature (4), provides a framework for evaluating such reasons. Though often imprecise, the strength of

egoistic reasons to damage the environment and impartial reasons to preserve it can be roughly compared. My hypothesis is this. The strength of our reasons to protect the environment will sometimes (perhaps often) outweigh our egoistic reasons to destroy it. This is especially evident, once again, when moral reasons come into play.

Return for a moment to a few of our examples. How strong is your egoistic reason for wanting to keep the thermostat a few degrees lower in the heat of summer, or your reason for wanting to drive to work rather than cycle? Now compare the strength of those egoistic reasons to the impartial reasons that stem from the degradation of farmland in the horn of Africa resulting from warming temperatures and the famine produced by it. It seems to me that the latter reasons unquestionably outweigh the former. And if so, we have definitive impartial reason to act in favor of the environment.

## 6. The Paralyzing Dilemma Dissolved

We are now, I believe, in a position to return to the paralyzing dilemma with some powerful new resources. Recall from Section 2 that the ‘last person’ thought experiment together with my argument from categoricity undermined the possibility of grounding an environmental ethic on either instrumentalism about the value of nature or a Norton-style environmental pragmatism. And recall from Section 3 that the inherentism espoused in the literature has been merely stipulated without argument, poorly justified, or backed by deeply mysterious claims.

Given the above conundrum, the question becomes this. Is there a way of grounding an environmental ethic that (I) does not reduce to mere instrumentalism about the value of nature, (II) supports some categorical obligations to the environment, and (III) does so without merely stipulating some mysterious inherent value, or crossing the fact/value divide in some deleterious fashion? My answer is yes. Parfit’s account gives us such a way. Here is how.

With regard to (I), I argue that an environmental ethic based on a Parfit-style account of objective reasons does not reduce to mere instrumentalism about the value of nature. As we’ve seen, for Parfit, facts both give us reasons and, it can equally be said, are those reasons. What makes these reasons objective (as opposed to subjective) is that they hold no matter what an agent’s subjective beliefs, desires, and intentions happen to be. If you have an apple allergy, the example went, you have a reason to avoid walnuts whether you know that these allergies co-vary or not. The same is true about your reason to stay put if you encounter an angry, venomous

snake. The payoff, here, comes about when we accept that some facts about the environment can also be objective reasons, and some of these reasons are impartial. If facts about environmental degradation indeed constitute such objective, impartial reasons for us to act in favor of the biotic community, then these reasons hold independently of any benefit to humans. If our environmental ethic rests on such objective, impartial reasons (independent of any human benefit), then it cannot be based on instrumental value alone. And if a Parfitian approach to environmental ethics does not reduce to a mere instrumentalism about the value of nature, we need not shoulder the problems with horn (A) of the paralyzing dilemma.

Furthermore, with regard to condition (II), a Parfitian account *does* allow for the categoricity we need from an environmental ethic. If, through the process of rational debate, it can be shown that we sometimes *do* have most reason to act impartially in the environment's stead, then that is what we should, ought to, or *must* do. And the force of this imperative is none other than a categorical one. It matters not what any of our subjective intentional states happen to be, that which we have the most reason to do is what we must do. This categoricity becomes even more salient when *moral* reasons come into play. If it can be shown that some of the facts about environmental degradation (like the suffering of malnourished children and sentient creatures) provide us with moral reasons, then these reasons are automatically decisive. They must be followed no matter what we desire or what good will come to us if we do not. Thus, a Parfitian account can accommodate all the categoricity we need. And if an appeal to objective reasons gives us some real categorical obligations to the environment, it escapes the argument from ethical categoricity.

Finally, with regard to condition (III), an environmental ethic based on the sorts of objective reasons heretofore discussed does not amount to a mere stipulation of mysterious inherent value. Neither does it surreptitiously slide from fact to value. The objectivity of reasons, on Parfit's account, is no more mysterious than the objectivity of facts. Indeed, for Parfit, *reasons are facts*. And those facts that are reason-giving, as we have seen, are *the bridge* between fact and value. We *should* act in accordance with the facts that are our best reasons. Reasons, in this sense, are the intermediate between fact and value. Thus, the objectivity of a Parfitian environmental ethic is neither mysterious nor is it guilty of crossing Hume's fact/value divide in a deleterious fashion. And if a Parfitian environmental ethic has neither of these problems, it also evades horn (B) of the paralyzing dilemma.

An appeal to objective reasons, therefore, allows us to escape both horns of the paralyzing dilemma and allows for genuine moral obligations to the environment.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have described what appears to be a paralyzing dilemma facing environmental ethics. Our only options for grounding obligations to the biotic community seem to be instrumentalism, inherentism, or environmental pragmatism: none of which are acceptable. I have motivated this dilemma by, in Section 2, offering a thought experiment to strengthen the case against the possibility of grounding an environmental ethic on instrumental value as well as a novel argument from categoricity to deductively undercut both instrumentalism and Norton's environmental pragmatism. In Section 3, I showed that inherentism either stipulates or poorly justifies the inherent value to which they subscribe. Despite these problems, however, I have offered a novel way out. In Section 4, I presented Parfit's account of reasons, his moral rationalism, and his wide value-based objectivism. In Section 5, I applied several key features of Parfit's account to the environment. And in Section 6, I showed how an appeal to objective reasons gives us resources to escape both horns of the paralyzing dilemma in such a way as to allow for real, categorical obligations to the environment.

If these arguments have been successful, we can conclude that the paralyzing dilemma has been well and truly dissolved.

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<sup>i</sup> (Norton 1996)

<sup>ii</sup> (Norton, 1996).

<sup>iii</sup> (Joyce, 2007, p. 43, italics added)

<sup>iv</sup> (Freeman III, 1983, p.319)

<sup>v</sup> (Russow, 1981, p. 476)

<sup>vi</sup> (Norton 250)

<sup>vii</sup> (*ibid*, 250)

<sup>viii</sup> (Leopold, 1949, p. 223, italics added)

<sup>ix</sup> (Taylor, 1981, p. 201, italics added)

<sup>x</sup> (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 266, italics added)

<sup>xi</sup> (Rolston III, 1991, p. 483)

<sup>xii</sup> (Leopold, 1949, p. 222)

<sup>xiii</sup> (Callicott, 1994, p. 228)

<sup>xiv</sup> (Parfit, 2011, p. 31)

<sup>xv</sup> (*ibid*, p. 32)

<sup>xvi</sup> (*ibid*, p. 33)

<sup>xvii</sup> (*ibid*, pp. 38-39)

<sup>xviii</sup> (*ibid*, p. 46)

<sup>xix</sup> (*ibid*, p. 128)

<sup>xx</sup> (*ibid*, pp. 128-129)

<sup>xxi</sup> (*ibid*, p. 124)