

# **Problems of the Value of Nature in Phenomenological Perspective or What to Do about Snakes in the Grass**

**Lester Embree**

## **I. Approach**

The perspective of this essay is phenomenological, by which is intended the original mature Husserlian or constitutive and not the existential, hermeneutical, or realistic forms of phenomenology that have also arisen. There are two objectionable aspects to Husserlian phenomenology today. Firstly, the texts of Husserl and his closer followers are difficult to comprehend, even in translation, and this explains in part why so much that considers itself “phenomenological” is actually no more than the interpretation of phenomenological texts by methods that are not especially phenomenological. This is not even good hermeneutics, which is interpretation *and* critique, for it does not reach the phase of critique, which can be phenomenological. In this respect, then, phenomenology needs to get beyond mere scholarship and into attempts to verify, correct, and extend earlier descriptions.

Secondly, while it is phenomenological to combine methodological reflections with substantive investigations, too many *soi disant* phenomenologists are so preoccupied with the specific procedures of transcendental and eidetic epochēs or refrainings and the resultant correlative purifications of objects and reductions of attitudes (and the four specific combinations of worldly factual, worldly eidetic, transcendental factual, and transcendental eidetic attitudes) that they tend to forget that phenomenological method is fundamentally reflective, theoretical, and, in a broad signification, observational.

The following analyses have been produced through reflective theoretical observation. Whether through reflection on others (based on so-called “empathy”)

or through self-observation, the phenomenologist focuses alternatively on intensive processes or encounterings (*Erlebnisse*) as intensive to objects and on objects as they present themselves to or as encountered by the personal or communal subject in question. This is also called noetico-noematic investigation. Proceeding thus, she can, firstly, differentiate components within encountering that belong to types and subtypes of awareness, be that awareness presentational or representational, if presentational, then predominantly perceptual, recollective, or expectational, and if representational, then subspecifically indicational, linguistic, and/or pictorial. Correlative to such types of awareness within encounterings, real objects, i.e., objects in time, present themselves directly or indirectly as in the present, future, or past of the awareness of them. There is also awareness of ideal objects, but it is not of concern here.

Secondly, the phenomenologist can reflectively distinguish encounterings according to the type of positionality that predominates in them, which is to say, according to whether believing, valuing, or willing predominates. Then the encounters can be called cognition, evaluations, or volitions (or actions). Then again, when it is desirable to combine allusion to the original form of awareness and to the type of positionality, one can speak of cognitive encounters, evaluative encounters, and volitional (or actional) encounters.

It is not uninteresting that there are positive, negative, and neutral modes of believing, valuing, and willing. Emphasizing the noetic side of the noetico-noematic parallelism, there is also a difference between firmness and degrees of shakiness for the positive and negative modes in the three sorts of positionality. Practical or volitional firmness is often called “resoluteness” and shakiness in this component is often called “hesitancy.” Cognitive firmness can be called “certitude” and cognitive shakiness can be called, to restore an old philosophical word, “conjecture” (the correlative state of the noematic doxothetic characteristic

can be called “probability” in a non-mathematical signification). There are also firm and shaky processes of valuing, the latter sometimes referred to as “ambivalence.”

On the side of the object as it presents itself and in intensive correlation with the types, modes, and states of noetic positionality, objects as believed in can be called “entities,” which can be positive or negative (and, as such, certain or probable) or neutral, objects as valued can be called “goods,” “bads,” and, perhaps, “neutrals,” and objects as willed can be said to be positively or negatively useful or, neutrally, useless “practical objects.” Such expressions have referents by virtue of the positional characteristics of objects as posited being focused upon and believed in, i.e., due to being objectivated.

An additional difference may come to mind with respect to the volitional-practical stratum, namely that between ends and means or, in other words, the end uses and the means uses that objects have when willed either for their own sakes or willed for the sakes of other objects. This can be considered the volitional specification of the generic intrinsic/extrinsic difference that is usually made with respect to the values that objects have as valued for their own sakes or as valued for the sakes of other objects. As for the cognitive stratum, some objects, are believed in as conducive to other objects, e.g., effects, while objects believed in for their own sakes have intrinsic belief characteristics. Something being believed conducive is different from its being extrinsically valued for its conduciveness and also different from its being willed or used as a means. Conduciveness includes causation but is not restricted to it, for a road is conducive to a destination without causing it. One can believe a road leads somewhere, in which case it has an extrinsic belief characteristic for the believer. (See Figure 1) The extensive parallelism among the types of positionality just summarized can lead to their confusion, e.g., mistaking the end use of a goal of the will for the intrinsic value of

an object valued for its own sake. Perhaps more clarity will come below. For now it needs to be said that these differences are among components reflectively discernible within concrete intensitive processes or encounters and among correlative components also reflectively differentiatable and observable as abstract parts of objects as they present themselves or as they are encountered. Concretely, encounters can be classified handily according either to the type of awareness or the type of valuing, and willing and, conversely, cognitive encounters, evaluative encounters, and volitional encounters always include some mode or modes of awareness or other. It is a question of what is there and predominates and what the reflective researcher is interested in.

(Figure 1)

Taxonomy of Some Components in Intentiveness (Noeses) and of Objects as  
They Present Themselves (Noemata)

24.				extrinsic
23.			neutral	intrinsic
22.				extrinsic
21.			negative	intrinsic
20.				extrinsic
19.		volitional	positive	intrinsic
18.				extrinsic
17.			neutral	intrinsic
16.				extrinsic
15.			negative	intrinsic
14.				extrinsic
13.		evaluational	positive	intrinsic
12.				extrinsic
11.			neutral	intrinsic
10.				extrinsic
09.			negative	intrinsic
08.				extrinsic
07.	positionality	cognitive	positive	intrinsic
06.				linguistic
05.				pictorial
04.		representational		indicational
03.				expectational
02.				recollectional
01.	awareness	presentational		perceptual

One can read characterizations from this taxonomy from right to left and with omissions and transformations, e.g., from “perceptual awareness” (omitting “presentational”) to “extrinsic neutral volition” (omitting “positional” and nominalizing “volitional”). The numbering from bottom to top is to suggest something about the orders of original and derivative and of founding to founded when justification in question.

## II. Focus

Problems of the value of ecological nature include, to begin with, questions of whether it can be valued as a whole, in part (or parts), or both, whether it (or they) has (or have) intrinsic value, extrinsic value, or both, and whether it (or they) has (or have) positive, negative, or neutral value or combinations thereof. Before approaching problems of this sort, more focus on the evaluational is needed.

Firstly, there is the question of the differences and relations of awareness and evaluation. Objects as objects of awareness, “awared objects,” objects as “awared,” as one might force English to say, are different from objects as valued. For example, when we speak of seeing a snake in the grass and speak literally, such speech refers to a reptile located among plants of a type and perceived visually. If a person fears snakes, i.e., disvalues and tends to avoid or destroy them, then the snake there has negative value for that person. On the other hand, a zoologist specializing in snakes might value this specimen quite positively. And the change in the same wriggling animal as it goes from expected to perceived and then from perceived to remembered is different from the change that a valued object can undergo when one goes from hating it to liking it.

Secondly, under the genus of positionality, there are differences between valuing and objects as valued, on the one hand, and both believing in and objects as believed in and willing and objects as willed, on the other hands. If we will the snake dead and use a stick as a means to kill it, there will also be disvaluing of the snake involved, but the destructive willing and the negative use of means to the negative end are different from valuing. This is because we can value without going on to will positively or negatively. (Analogously and on the linguistic level, there can be advice, which amounts to saying that something is good or at least better than something else and is thus evaluative, that neither the advisor nor the

advisee acts on.)

Nor is valuing believing. Belief is not easy to distinguish from awareness when the object is given in person, e.g., when we see and believe in the snake right there before us. They can be distinguished more easily if the difference between so-called empty or, better, blind and intuitive or seeing awareness is used. Thus, while we are not seeing the snake, we can still believe or disbelieve in it being in the patch of grass. Perhaps it has just slithered out of sight, but there has not been enough time for it to leave the patch or perhaps we merely shut our eyes. It is then believed in but no longer seen. There is awareness underlying the believing, but that awareness is blind. We then believe in the snake and can argue soundly that the snake is still in there somewhere. That about which we thus argue is not intuitively aware, but rather blindly aware. It can be intuitively remembered, but as a strictly present object it is out of sight, albeit still believed in.

Just as valuing and objects as valued can be regularly discerned in the background of willing and objects as willed, so too believing in and objects as believed in can be discerned in the background of valuing and objects as valued. Putting the four strata of the encountering process and of the objects as they are encountered together with our running example, we can say that the willing to destroy or to protect the snake in the grass is different from but related to the valuing of it positively or negatively, that the valuing is different from but related to the disbelieving in as well as the willing of the object, and the belief component is different from but related to one or another subtype of awareness component as well as to the valuing of the snake there in the grass.

Evaluation appears crucial to questions of the justification of willing or action. At least *prima facie*, if the valuing of one alternative over another is justified, then the willing that it founds and motivates, i.e., justifies, would be

justified. This is like the way in which the believing component in a concrete encountering can be justified by the awareness of the pertinent subtype, e.g., the seeing of the snake justifying the believing in it as there now and the remembering of the snake justifying believing in it as in a place previously. The problem is whether a justified believing is sufficient to justify a valuing directly and thus an action indirectly. This problem has been mentioned here in order to reinforce the appreciation of the place of valuing and objects as valued and not in order to propose a solution. A solution does presuppose at least an outline of what evaluation is, which is, in relation to living nature, the present concern.<sup>1</sup>

### III. Nature

The terms distinguished in the taxonomy above will be employed in approaching some value problems in environmental philosophy after a sketch of living nature. Nature here is biological or, better, ecological nature. Without taking a position on the question of the reducibility of biology to chemistry and physics and recognizing that there is not a great deal yet in the way of a constitutive phenomenology of biology, it is still clear that nature can be observed ecologically. Then organisms are seen to have environments with which they interact. The environment of any given organism contains organisms of the same and different species. An organism takes nourishment from her environment and nourishment

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis of the concepts in encountering and objects as encountered is derived from Husserl's *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, I, II, & III* (1912-1913). Cf. Lester Embree, "Some Noetico-Noematic Analyses of Action and Practical Life," in *The Phenomenology of the Noema*, edd. John Drummond and Lester Embree, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992, 157-210 and "Advances concerning Evaluation and Action in Husserl's *Ideas II*," in *Issues in Husserl's "Ideas II"*, eds. Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996. 166-91.

can be conceived so broadly that not only food and water but also air, light, and other forms of radiation are included. An organism also returns waste gases as well as fluids, solids, and heat to her environment; wastes of one organism may well be nutrients for other organisms.

Such interactive processes involving organisms and environments are quite complicated and vary with the temperature, minerals, wind and water currents, fellow organisms, and so on. They also result from evolution, so that, in an ongoing way, ever changing organisms adapt to ever changing environments, including environments changed by organisms and organisms changed by environments. Starting from any organism one can quickly recognize that it functions with many others in communities, ecosystems, etc. If pertinent factors and the long-term processes are considered, then one can even speak of the planet as an ecosphere. In that case ecosubsystems and sub-subsystems of various sorts can be recognized within it. Everything alive is alive amidst all else that is.

Nature in ecological perspective, i.e., focusing on organic bodies, interestingly parallels nature in broadly social-scientific perspective, i.e., the latter focusing on relationships and interactions among psyches rather than somas. An individual subject interacts economically, linguistically, sociologically, etc. with others and participates in families, clans, communities, societies, nations, empires, etc. and ultimately the analog of the ecosphere for humans socially is humanity. This similarity can be pursued quite far. Indeed, cultural evolution might well parallel biological evolution conceptually. Although there are interesting exceptions, philosophy and other disciplines seem thus far to have tended to emphasize the psychic and sociological. But the soma can also be emphasized over the psyche just as the psyche has been emphasized over the soma.

In ecological perspective, *Homo sapiens sapien* is but one species among others, albeit the one currently causing the greatest environmental change, and the

above remarks apply to it. Since at least Descartes, however, contrasting perspectives have been popular in which the human body and its organic insertion in nature are abstracted from and the remaining mind considered apart from and relating chiefly contemplatively to the rest of nature. In that contrasting view, there tends to remain interest in how the outer world physically and neuro-physiologically affects mental events and vice versa and within the mind there is a tendency in this perspective also to abstract from the evaluational and volitional in order to emphasize the intellectual or cognitive. Even questions of relationships with fellow humans are at best secondary.

Ecological thinking includes somas as organisms, but does not need to go to the opposite extreme of eliminating psyches such that organisms are considered merely complex physical systems causally connected. The ecological or environmental perspective can thus be viewed as between two extremes. It would then still not be too surprising to find specimens of *homo sapiens sapiens* considering themselves in various ways more important than other species. On the other hand, among the differences of this species is the ability to recognize ecological insertion and to value various behaviors of its own as well as of other species within the ecosphere and indeed consciously to act upon its evaluations.

Few until recently have appreciated the human participation in the ecosphere, but changes in the planetary atmosphere from smog to green-house effects and ozone holes seem to have made the pollution of the seas and lakes and rivers and streams and ground water and indeed ecosystems and species extinctions and various unsustainable practices less ignorable. Some of the talk is hysterical and paranoid, but just because some of us are hysterical and paranoid does not mean that really huge and dangerous things are not happening out there in living nature.

Essentially confining ourselves now to ecological objects as valued and the

valuing of them by humans, which can be focused upon reflectively, observed, and theoretically described, we can begin in a methodologically individualistic fashion, but need to follow through to communal life in the end. We can also begin from human life but need to end up considering the earth as ecosphere. Each human can focus on her own body or, preferably, her soma as a case of personal human organic life and, with respect to the soma, a difference between wellness and illness can be recognized. Precise scientific definitions of these terms are not necessary here.

Like many terms referring to somatic life, wellness and illness are equivocal. It is difficult to comprehend them without the connotations that wellness is good and illness is bad, but such a comprehension is possible in, e.g., a biological-scientific attitude. Then the effect of venom whereby illness and perhaps death replaces wellness and then that whereby an antidote causes wellness to replace illness can be observed and believed in. In an attitude of the pertinent type, which can be called “cognitive,” causal assertions can be true or false but normative assertions are excluded. Then the words “wellness” and “illness” as well as statements about their causes have purely cognitive significations.

In the evaluative, axiomatic, or normative signification, by contrast, one *ought* to be well and *ought not* to be ill. In other words, wellness is good and illness is bad. In yet other words and with questions of justification aside, wellness is positively valued for its own sake and illness is negatively valued for its own sake. The same holds for circumstances conducive to them, such as water and air unpolluted and polluted, except that their values are extrinsic. If illness is of negative value, then poisonous snakes, who can cause illness, are also of negative value. Keeping away from such a snake in the grass as well as, more drastically, killing it would be valued positively in relation to the positive value of wellness. Avoiding the bad here is seeking the good.

This is of course an abstract example, for the poisonous snake is, like any organism, part of an ecosystem. Suppose such snakes eat rodents who carry nasty diseases to which humans are prone. Again valuing our wellness over illness intrinsically, there seems a problem of valuing these snakes negatively with respect to the effects of snake bites on humans over valuing them positively as disease-controlling agents. Two recognitions are involved here. Firstly, the organism needs to be considered within its ecosystem and thus in relation to other organisms, and, secondly, there is more than one respect in which an organism can be valued. Snakes in the grass may be good for us if left alone and their habitat preserved.

This has been a case of evaluating relations among organisms, namely humans, snakes, rodents, and viruses, and also the patch of grass, and chiefly in relation to humans. (This anthropocentrism can have a herpecentric position substituted for it, although it seems doubtful that mother snakes warn their young about humans in the grass.) As the scope of consideration broadens, more and more organisms are included and are valued either for their own sakes, e.g., human wellness as good and human illness as bad, or for the sake of other organisms, e.g., humans, and in positively or negatively extrinsic ways. Since interplanetary biological interactions seem minimal and physical factors, especially the solar radiation of light, heat, ultraviolet, etc., are fairly constant, there is a limit to the broadening of the scope of consideration. The planet can be treated as a closed totality.

Of late there is an increasing recognition of planetary ecological processes. There is the ozone layer, global warming, and other atmospheric changes, circulation patterns included, there are changes in the seas—which is to say most of the surface of the planet—that include animals, vegetables, and minerals (and raise more than twenty questions), and there are solid and fluid changes on and in

the land. The spread of organisms called diseases because of their impacts on other plants and animals positively valued by humans are prominent in this sphere thus ecologically considered. As more and more dependencies and interactions and feedbacks are recognized, that which is valued has become more and more complicated. Yet, if it is granted that the same object can be valued in different respects, sometimes positively in relation to this and sometimes negatively in relation to that, it seems plausible that a value system be developed in parallel fashion. Indeed, contemporary culture can be seen to include increasing re-evaluation as more and more ecological knowledge is disseminated.

#### **IV. Problems of the Value of Nature**

Two issues seem especially philosophical in this connection. One concerns the relation of part and whole and the other concerns extrinsic and ultimate intrinsic values. Putting these together in a distorted or at least incomplete form, we can ask whether or not the whole of the rest of living nature ought to be valued for the sake of humans, who are alone valued for their own sakes.

If we are phenomenologists, we have learned to reflect even in the formulation of our questions. Thus, when we speak of the values of objects, we know to reformulate this talk reflectively into speech about objects as valued and about the valuing of objects by valuers. Then we ask about any evaluated object not only “Evaluated how?” but also “Evaluated by whom?” Tacitly, the above discussion has been confined to human valuing and, correlatively, to objects as valued by humans. It is not currently clear to the present writer whether or not plants value themselves or one another and not much clearer whether insects do. Cats and dogs and most other so-called higher animals may or may not value themselves, but it is plain that they have preferences in food and people. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that so-called lower animals can envisage and value

entire ecosystems, much less the planetary ecosphere.

What of super-human animals? Since most societies have been polytheistic, it is not *prima facie* foolish to speak of gods. For most societies, the gods are alive, they have minds, and indeed they have bodies, although they seem powerful enough in that case not to suffer somatic illness much. They are higher than humans in various ways in various societies due to their believed in greater powers in this or that respect. Most if not all of the gods would seem valuers and probably even more easily capable than humans at valuing the earth as an ecosphere.

It is not idle to speculate in this way, for the doctrine of stewardship is prominent in environmental thinking today. This doctrine seems reasonably interpretable axiologically such that either living nature is of intrinsic value for the gods or the gods themselves have the ultimate intrinsic value (for themselves, to begin with) and living nature, humans included in it, is valued by them extrinsically for their sake. It could also be true that the gods value humans above the rest of living nature and require humans to steward the earth secondly if not ultimately for human sake. Sometimes, of course, humans believe themselves the gods, the ultimate good in relation to whom alone all else has value.

At the other extreme, the earthly ecosphere as a whole would have the highest intrinsic value. This might involve conceiving it as evaluated by all organisms counting equally, but, as just suggested, it does not seem that all can value it as a whole. The snake might not value more than the mouse she is currently stalking or swallowing. Setting aside super-humans, this would leave the entirety of living nature as possibly valued solely by humans. This seems possible. There is, for example, a traditional opposition whereby the god-like human is considered essentially outside nature. From that point of view, that which humans value ultimately might not be themselves but rather their big object called nature of which they are parts, but this does not seem to have happened much in the history

of philosophy.

There is another approach. The valuing by human persons of their own somatic wellness intrinsically seems rather common. The wellness of others, such as spouses, children, parents, siblings, friends, and indeed all specimens of *Homo sapiens* could be valued for its own sake. Then, as ecological insight increased, the believed in separateness of humans from their environments would decrease. It might even be recognized that they are inseparable and that to value one in one respect is to value the other in the related respect. Briefly, the wellness of the organism cannot be positively and intrinsically valued without the wellness of the environment, specimens of other species as well as of the same one, etc., being then positively and intrinsically valued. They are both parts of a whole that is then itself ultimately intrinsically valued.

By whom is it valued? At least by humans. They do not value themselves apart from nature first and they do not value living nature without them first. Rather, they value the earth, themselves included, first. Not trees before humans or humans before trees but earth as including humans and trees might have the ultimate intrinsic value.

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This essay has attempted to show something of how environmental philosophy can be phenomenological with respect to some problems of value. The claim is not that the problems have been solved, nor even that all of them have been raised. The problem of how to value social systems in relation to ecological systems, for example, has only been implied. A final remark concerning phenomenology and also to show that much still needs to be done: If the approach to evaluation through reflective observation of objects as valued and the valuing of objects is pursued far enough, then the problem will arise of whether

intersubjective valuing can play the role of ultimate ground for non-relative values at the same time that it is part of the valued object that is grounded. At that point, the option of a provisional suspending of belief or refraining with respect to the being-in-the-world of the valuing intersubjectivity for the sake of a transcendental grounding of value can be considered. The purpose, again, of this essay is more to raise than to settle questions about the value of living nature phenomenologically.