

## Can we be Grateful to Nature? Environmental Virtue Ethics and the Otherness of Nature

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### ABSTRACT

Rachel Carson begins her revolutionary book *Silent Spring* with a quote from E.B. White that reads “we would stand a better chance of survival if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciatively.” While White’s advice can account for an instrumental relationship towards nature, I believe that the more important relationship offered in his recommendation is one of appreciation or gratitude. But how are we to understand gratitude as appreciating Nature non-instrumentally when it has traditionally always been understood as a response to a benefit received? My motivation is to modify our traditional conception of gratitude alongside Simon Hailwood’s account of the “Otherness of Nature” to see how we can truly show gratitude for Nature without simply reflecting on how Nature serves human interests.

### KEYWORDS

Environmental Virtue Ethics; Gratitude; Hannah Arendt; Simon Hailwood; Otherness

### *Introduction*

Rachel Carson begins her revolutionary book *Silent Spring* with a quote from E.B. White that reads ‘I am pessimistic about the human race because it is too ingenious for its own good. Our approach to nature is to beat it into submission. We would stand a better chance of survival if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciatively.’ Two possible readings arise from this quote. One reading is that we ought to adopt an appreciative perspective because our survival depends upon the health of the planet to sustain us. This reading focuses upon the planet’s instrumental relationship to its inhabitants by which environmental protection policies are justified as ultimately *human* protection policies. While this is certainly one of the intended meanings White also makes the recommendation that we would take up a more appropriate relation to the environment ‘if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciatively.’ Rather than solely relying upon developing technologies that dramatically change ecosystems and the environment to adapt to

our human needs, White suggests we consider changing ourselves to adapt to the planet *and* be grateful about it! Clearly, we cannot live up to White's advice without a sense of gratitude towards the natural world, but what exactly does that involve?

Accommodating ourselves to the planet involves first recognizing the planet as something more than a mere tool or instrument to be bent into shape for human needs and such an attitude implies that the planet has some kind of value independent of our human needs. To put the point in other words, White's recommendation rejects what Richard Sylvan labels the 'sole value assumption' which claims that 'humans are the only things of irreducible (or intrinsic) value in the universe, the value of all other things reducing to or answering back to that of humans in one way or another.'<sup>1</sup> Rejecting the 'sole value assumption' also includes going beyond environmental positions referred to as 'reformism,' which are theories that attempt to extend moral consideration of non-human animals or the environment by arguing that the fundamental grounds of moral consideration for other people cannot logically exclude other kinds of beings without falling into some kind of contradiction. The animal rights and animal liberation movements are both 'reformist' positions in the sense that they attempt to show that the same considerations that guide our moral obligations towards other people equally support considering non-human animals or the environment as a whole in our moral thinking.<sup>2</sup> This general approach asserts that the divisions we make between the human and non-human worlds are largely arbitrary (at least morally speaking) and such divisions hide the important shared commonalities. In contrast, a more radical strand in environmental ethics argues that our moral consideration of non-human animals and ecosystems derives from a recognition of their distinct and unique non-instrumental value. Thinkers such as Aldo Leopold, Baird Callicott and Paul Taylor have developed philosophical accounts capable of understanding non-human animals and/or the

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvan, Richard. 'A Critique of Deep Ecology I'. *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 40, 1985; p. 5

<sup>2</sup> See Singer 1975, 1981; Regan 2004

ecosystems as having value independently from their usefulness to satisfying human interests. While the reformist approach motivates environmental conscientiousness by attempting to show that non-human animals and the ecosystem are just like us in the morally relevant features, the ‘radical’ environmental accounts attempt to understand the value that non-humans can have in their own right. If an important part of recognizing the value of nature is understanding such a value independently of human purposes, then these radical approaches are the most promising ways to capture the non-instrumental value of nature.<sup>3</sup>

But what does the virtue of gratitude have to contribute to these ‘radical’ understandings of our relationship to the natural world? The larger project that this essay aims to contribute is to advocate for the use of virtue ethics as a framework for understanding the moral relationship we have to the non-human living world. My suggestion is that such an extension of virtue ethics to various environmental questions will share more in common with these ‘radical’ theories and I aim to demonstrate this by focusing upon a specific virtue, viz. gratitude. While there may be many traditional virtues (benevolence, generosity, etc.) that could be extended to how one relates to the environment, gratitude appears to be *uniquely* suited to be an *environmental* virtue (as opposed to a more general normative virtue) insofar as it offers a way to appreciate the natural world on its own terms. The nature of gratitude as an environmental virtue I will argue is an attitude that actively ‘wills something to be what it is’ and this conception of gratitude finds a natural companion in the ‘otherness view’ of the value of nature developed by Simon Hailwood. This essay aims to develop the ‘otherness view’ in connection with a conception of ‘gratitude’ as an especially unique kind of environmental virtue that must be a central component of any environmental ethic that takes seriously the unique (i.e. non-human) value of the natural world. Adopting this perspective is important for recognizing the difficult balance we must maintain in respecting

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<sup>3</sup> For an interesting and intelligent discussion of the divide see Mark Sagoff’s essay “Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 22, (1984): 297-307

nature's otherness on the one hand while also valuing our shared commonalities and interdependence on the other. An environmental virtue ethic is particularly well-suited to strike such a balance and gratitude is a case study in how it does so.

### *Can Gratitude be an Environmental Virtue?*

Thinking of gratitude as an important environmental attitude is a fairly recent turn within the environmental ethics literature. In part this growing recognition seems due to the growing interest in turning to virtue ethics for insights in addressing questions of value relating to the environment. The emphasis upon gratitude as a virtue, however, has a long history in western philosophy with one of the earliest reflections on the matter being made by Epicurus. Following in line with his "fourfold remedy" he argues that we do not owe gratitude (or anger for that matter) towards the gods, since truly immortal beings would not concern themselves with the feelings of lower and imperfect creatures. Epicurus rather turns his attention towards the importance of gratitude towards friends and Nature. In the case of Nature, Epicurus believes "Gratitude must be vouchsafed to blessed Nature because she has made the essential things easy to procure and those things that are hard to procure non-essentials."<sup>4</sup> (Bailey 1926, Frag. 67) For those familiar with Epicurus this succinctly represents his philosophy for living well (viz. that one ought to maximize their pleasure by preferring and loving the essentials that are easy to acquire and forego those things which are not). "Nature" here stands for more than just the flora and fauna of the world, but also includes our own human "nature" to which we should be grateful that we are so fortuitously built with the possibility for achieving happiness in the Epicurean sense.

The way in which Epicurus excludes gratitude towards the gods is historically anomalous in western philosophy, especially after the period of medieval scholasticism.

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<sup>4</sup> See also DeWitt 1937 for a substantial discussion of gratitude in the thought of Epicurus and later Epicureanism.

Discussions of gratitude are more commonly found in connection with religious ethical traditions that focus upon the importance of recognizing the gift bestowed upon us by God and the requisite response of gratitude we are obliged to enact. Interestingly enough, Epicurus' position that gratitude can and should be extended towards Nature, but not the gods, is criticized for implicitly personifying Nature by ascribing to it the characteristics of benevolence and volition.<sup>5</sup> Stephen Jones echoes the criticism stating that "we already find in the Epicurean notion of gratitude a petition to higher powers for guidance and succour: gratitude is, even in Epicurus' somewhat whimsical treatment, oriented towards recognising the *intention* of a beneficiary through both petition for further favours and honour for favours received." (Jones 2014, 21) In relation to Nature, Jones makes it clear that there exists an important "inadequacy of expressing gratitude to some entity such as 'nature' which lacked any intention in giving... gratitude could only be an expression between two communicating parties. One could not... praise "Mother Earth", if by that term we are to understand nothing more than nature itself, as without the *intention* in giving, there could be [no] coherent notion of *gift* for which we can give thanks." (Jones 2014, 20) For Jones, the only coherent way to show gratitude for the natural world is to see such a world as a gift intended to benefit us by its (and our) creator. Consequently, Epicurus must be confused about the virtue of gratitude towards Nature.

Underlying the critique of the Epicurean position is a certain understanding of gratitude as 'the proper or called-for response in a beneficiary to benefits or beneficence from a benefactor.' (Manela 2015) While this may be how we commonly think of this term, when we think of our relation to the natural world it becomes clear that this conception is severely limited. This way of approaching the notion of 'gratitude' has an inescapable dimension of

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<sup>5</sup> DeWitt makes the claim that "Since Nature, though possessed of activity, is not possessed of volition, and consequently is incapable of either malicious or benevolent feelings, Epicurus is guilty of a certain inconsistency in enjoining gratitude to her and thus personifying her." (DeWitt 1937, 321)

debt and obligation.<sup>6</sup> It is a *reactive* notion in the sense that it only arises in response to receiving a benefit, which means that *until* a benefit is bestowed upon us gratitude plays no clear role in our thinking. Gratitude understood in this way is only appropriate when the benefit we receive was intended to benefit us. If we unintentionally or coincidentally benefit from something, then it seems strange to say that we *owe* that person a debt of gratitude. From this definition it is perhaps understandable as to why ‘gratitude’ has made such little impact with regard to considerations of environmentalism. If gratitude can only be involved when there is an intended benefit received, then in the case of the environment gratitude seems inapplicable because even when the environment does benefit us it does not intentionally do so. Thus, gratitude seems to have no place within an environmental ethic.

One might be tempted to take Jones’ and Aquinas’ advice here and reinsert God into the picture. After all, if what we are missing is a volitional being, then who better to fill that role than God? Redirecting our gratitude away from the environment and towards God as the creator of the environment is problematic in that gratitude does not apply directly to the environment, but is only worthwhile insofar as it is as *gift* from God. Nature’s value then is seen in wholly instrumental terms and is rendered fundamentally no different than any object of benefit. This betrays the radical environmentalist refrain that an environmental ethic must have some way of addressing the value of nature non-instrumentally. The move to make gratitude applicable to the environment indirectly by making God the object of our gratitude in fact removes the uniqueness of gratitude *towards* Nature. It simply becomes one object of benefit amongst others and while gratitude can be spoken of in relation to the environment it is only as a general extension of such an attitude to recognized benefits.

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<sup>6</sup> An interesting etymological question can be raised here. This definition of gratitude seems to have built in the notion of God as an omnibenevolent being or at least is easily attached to such a being. It seems quite possible that our contemporary understanding of gratitude is largely that handed down to us by religious ethical traditions,

But this cannot be right. It seems perfectly reasonable to say that we ought to be grateful for the existence of sunsets over ocean waters or the diversity and variety of plants and animals in nature in the same way a parent can wake up grateful that they have a child to hold and comfort. It is not because of a perceived benefit that gratitude applies, but because a world with beauty and such marvelous complexity is better than a world without them. We are not simply ‘grateful to’ other beings, but often simply ‘grateful that’ things are the way they are.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps Epicurus was on to something in speaking about the plausibility of gratitude towards Nature (even though he also seems to characterize the relationship in beneficial terms) because it seems possible to take White’s advice and appreciate Nature directly, but how can we make sense of that?

A good place to start is with an alternative characterization of ‘gratitude’ by Reed Elizabeth Loder. Her initial description of ‘gratitude’ is ‘a finely tuned propensity to notice and feel grateful for one’s surroundings on a regular basis.’ (Loder 2011, 384) She is critical of the ‘exchange view of gratitude’ as being ‘quite restrictive’ and unable to account for the fact that ‘Many people feel more generally grateful for ineffable bounties from untraceable sources, such as ideas, flourishing, beauty, and even all there is.’ (Loder 2011, 397) Her aim is to develop a more expansive understanding of gratitude that she calls ‘free-floating gratitude,’ which she characterizes as a ‘pervasive emotion’ capable of ‘seep[ing] into one’s being and shap[ing] all perceptions and dispositions.’ (Loder 2011, 398) It is important to highlight the emotive nature of Loder’s view. Her theory captures nicely the experience of gratefulness where there is no clear benefactor and, thus, provides insight into making sense of environmental gratitude. However, a lingering question that remains is ‘what attitude is at work when one expresses gratitude to the environment?’ One might respond saying that it is an attitude of ‘thankfulness’ or simply an expression of ‘thank you’ that we demonstrate when showing gratitude for the environment. The problem here is that such an attitude

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<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Jackson Schwartz for helping to point out this clarificatory distinction.

implies a benefactor or at least some kind of agent, even if we are not thinking of gratitude in the narrow ‘exchange view.’ Thankfulness still seems to carry with it some relational connotation between agents and, thus, cannot explain the attitude we take when expressing gratitude to the environment.

What is importantly distinct about Loder’s conception of ‘environmental gratitude’ is that it offers a sense of gratitude separated from any benefit received from one’s environmental surroundings and this opens the way for what we could label the ‘active’ sense of gratitude that appreciates Nature for being what it is, a key insight in the philosophy of the ancient Stoics as well as Hannah Arendt. The idea here is to provide some insight into the particular attitude the virtuous agent adopts in relation to the environment. On this understanding we have a more expansive concept of gratitude that does not simply operate at the reactive level, but also gives us a way to act virtuously in relation to environmental issues.<sup>8</sup> The task now is to figure out how the Stoics and Arendt can help explain why it is valuable and important to appreciate something for being what it is and how this applies to gratitude towards the environment. It is to their theories we turn now.

### *Gratitude in the Philosophies of Stoicism and Arendt*

Beginning with the Stoics, perhaps the most identifiably Stoic claim is that the goal or end of life is “living in accordance with nature.” The term ‘nature’ must be understood in terms of the ancient Greek *physis*, which stands for things as the way they are essentially as a process of growth and change. Thus, built into this prescription is a dynamic process of flourishing and development for the kind of being one is. Nature in this sense refers both to

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<sup>8</sup> The idea here is not to eliminate the sense of gratitude that is a response to benefits received, but to expand the definition to include this other dimension of gratitude as an active appreciation of Nature as being what it is. Both are important for understanding gratitude as a virtue, but the active dimension of gratitude being developed in this essay is what truly allows us to gratitude to an environmental mindset.

the essential characteristics of individual beings as well as applying at a more cosmic and worldly level. The universe for the Stoics is rationally ordered (often referred to as God) making it possible for humans to know it because we ourselves have rationality as a defining element of our human nature. Furthermore, the Stoics were some of the first scientifically inclined thinkers to bite the determinist bullet and argue that because all actions have a prior cause they are necessarily determined by a first cause. However bleak determinism may seem, we can take some respite in knowing that the world is providentially organized; that the parts are given a specific nature in order to benefit the whole (i.e. the *kosmos*). It is not the idea that the universe works to benefit me personally, but that I (and human beings more generally) are parts that serve a purpose and function within the organized whole. As Julia Annas puts it, “The world as a whole exhibits order and rational planning and is all for the best.” (Annas 1995, 161) What is most relevant to our topic is the attitude that the Stoics adopt in line with these commitments, viz. the active attitude of willing the world to be the way it is. Thus the claim that our final end is to live in accordance with nature means that we must not simply grudgingly acknowledge what happens as good, but *actively* will it to be what it is because in a providentially ordered universe we can only achieve *eudaimonia* (flourishing or happiness) by fulfilling our purpose and this involves perfecting the purpose we were given; i.e. our nature.

The account of the Stoics discussed here can also shed some light on the position of Epicurus. One way to read Epicurus’ rationalization for why gratitude is an appropriate expression towards Nature is to see us as the benefactors of the food, warmth, protection, etc. that is provided by Nature. However, the way in which Epicurus talks about these benefits focuses primarily upon the harmonious way the world is structured. It should not be entirely surprising that there is an overlap between these two ancient schools of thought because as both philosophies are attempting to explain how we live well they are both focused upon what we can control and determine in order to achieve happiness. Nature as a force and

structure that makes the flourishing of creatures possible is admirable and worthy of a certain sense of gratitude, even though neither the Stoics nor the Epicureans explicitly take Nature as aiming to specifically benefit humans. The specific sense of gratitude that appears in both philosophies is an attitude that accepts and wills Nature to be what it is. The Stoics align their attitudes and expectations along such a metric, while the Epicureans seek pleasure in its simple forms according to the way we and the world are structured.

In Hannah Arendt's dissertation on St. Augustine's concept of love, she comes to understand his definition of love as '*volo ut sis*' ('I will that you be what you are').<sup>9</sup> This interpretation pervades much of Arendt's philosophy and adds a unique element to how we can understand 'gratitude' in relation to the environment. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she writes 'This mere existence, that is, all that which is mysteriously given to us by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies and the talents of our minds, can be adequately dealt with only by the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy, or by the great and incalculable grace of love, which says with Augustine, *Volo ut sis* (I want you to be), without being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation.' (Arendt 1963, 301) Stephan Kampowski argues that Arendt's interest in this concept has important connections to her idea of 'natality,' the term Arendt uses to describe the fact of birth as constituting the individual person as a 'new beginning.' Arendt believes that our capacity for free action largely develops out of the fact that we are 'newcomers who are born into the world as strangers.' (Arendt 1998, 9) Natality further implies that a plurality of humans exist, not in the sense of just a numeric multiplicity of human beings, but a diversity of unique individuals that are unlike any other. Each is a 'new beginning' and therefore unlike any other beginning. Or as Arendt puts it, 'Plurality is the condition of human actions

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<sup>9</sup> It is sometimes presented as though it is a direct quote from Augustine, but Augustine never formulates a definition of love this way. However, in a letter from Heidegger to Arendt in 1925 he writes "Amo means volo, ut sis, Augustine once said: I love you—I want that you be what you are." (*Briefe 1925-1975*, ed. Ursula Ludz) This appears to be the first association of this specific phrase with Arendt and it then emerges in two of her most well known books, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Life of the Mind*.

because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.’ (Arendt 1998, 8) Is this value of plurality simply limited to humans? There is no reason preventing the extension of valuing plurality in nature and recognizing the plurality of living beings other than humans can enhance our appreciation of plurality in human beings and the coinciding sense of respect. The conception of love as ‘*volō ut sis*’ reflects this condition of plurality and natality but goes the further step in actively *willing* such beings to be what they are.

That Arendt’s conception of ‘gratitude’ has a deeply political and ethical dimension is clear in that ‘gratitude,’ for Arendt, is a pivotal response to the political condition of modernity after the rise of totalitarianism. We are faced with an unprecedented choice in the history of humankind, a choice between resentment and gratitude. Resentment is a prominent characteristic of totalitarian regimes because of their powerful need to reduce everything to a predictable uniformity and homogeneity. This hegemonic reductionism is in the service of molding the world, and human beings, into a determinate shape most starkly demonstrated by the Nazi eugenics program. For Arendt, this totalitarian attitude is one of resentment against our given nature, in fact against *anything* given. There is nothing out of the boundaries of modification morally speaking and our limitations are merely seen as technological problems to be surpassed with enough scientific R&D. However, according to Arendt we are presented with a choice and ‘The alternative to this resentment [of the given]... would be a fundamental gratitude for the few elementary things that indeed are invariably given us, such as life itself, the existence of man and the world.’ (Arendt 1951, 438-439) This ‘fundamental gratitude’ is importantly similar to Arendt’s conception of love because it shares a love of the given, which must mean a care for things being what they are.

Both the Stoics and Arendt have shown us a non-instrumental conception of gratitude and, as an environmental virtue, gratitude is an attitude in which we actively will the environment to be what it is out of a sense of respect for its non-instrumental value, not

merely because it benefits us in some way. Thus, it must be possible for us to speak coherently of being grateful for things that we do not recognize receiving some kind of benefit and no agent to directly intend to provide a benefit for us, but are nevertheless appropriate objects of gratitude. However, the common definition of gratitude views it as requiring some kind of benefit in order to generate the gratefulness, otherwise what are you grateful for? This reactive understanding takes an unfortunately narrow perspective in explaining the plurality of ways in which we can feel gratitude that something is the way it is. It seems reasonable for me to be grateful that the White Helmets were a pivotal force for helping injured and desperate Syrians during the bombardment of Aleppo. I can feel grateful that light rays from the sun make the ocean waves sparkle and the picturesque scene of early morning fog that rolls over mountains disguising their height from those standing below its wake. Imagine a work of art that only few people can see and has never been photographed, yet is supposedly a magnificently beautiful artwork that inspires those who do have the chance to view it. Even though I have not seen the painting and perhaps never will does not mean that I cannot be grateful *that* it exists, even though I gain no benefit from its having been painted.<sup>10</sup> None of these examples of gratitude make sense on the narrow reactive model of owing gratitude from a perceived benefit.

Perhaps, the *real* value in nature is that its aesthetic appreciation does benefit us, either in the pleasure we gain from the experience or in the thoughts, insights, and useful information gained through the aesthetic experience. If this were true, then our experience of gratitude is still rooted in the reactive sense. While some examples of gratitude experienced through aesthetic appreciation could have their value recast into being valuable for their benefit, such an approach mischaracterizes the value of at least some aesthetic appreciation. Take for example witnessing the natural phenomena of an early morning fog slipping over

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<sup>10</sup> This is not the same as being “glad” something exists because such an attitude carries no conscious recognition of the thing’s value-in-itself. Furthermore, it is a description of a type of mental state and not a conscious or intentional activity by which I have total control over willing.

the tree top bulges of a mountain range. Having such an experience certainly has an impact upon me, but the value of the experience is not in what it does for me, but that it is beautiful and valuable in itself. To shift the value of the experience to being about one's own pleasure represents a worrying kind of egoism (or narcissism) that misses out on the valuable experience itself. While we can certainly speak of how art offers benefits to people and how nature as art can do so as well we should not reduce all aesthetic experiences of nature to their mere utility value for an individual because this leaves out the independent value that is supposed to be the source of our pleasure or learning.<sup>11</sup> To shift our focus away from the independent value of nature in itself leaves a profound gap in what we are actually appreciating.

If we keep in mind that gratitude means willing something to be what it is, then gratitude is not only a reactive attitude but is a conscious choice to value that being. I am not advocating dropping the beneficiary sense of gratitude, but only recognizing that gratitude is a richer concept and reflects a balance in our attitudes that humans ought to adopt in relation to the non-human natural world. The complicated structure of gratitude nicely imitates a complicated relationship that humans have to nature, our own as well as that outside us.

### *The Otherness of Nature*

While Arendt and the stoics help shed light upon the importance of 'willing something to be what it is,' this idea can also be understood in terms of 'otherness' accounts of environmental value. What we are 'willing to be what it is' is what makes that being unique as the being it is and in the case of the environment what is unique is also what

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<sup>11</sup> The lesson here is one learned from the paradox of hedonism; viz. that while it may be true that one gains pleasure from valuable experiences, if the pleasure becomes the aim and focus, then the capacity for having the valuable experience itself can be threatened. The clearest case where this happens is with friendship, since if you are only out to maximize your own pleasure, then true friendship will be unattainable as you cannot make the requisite value commitment to the other person when it may conflict with your own pleasure.

constitutes the ‘otherness’ of nature; i.e. the value of nature in itself. Also, a focus upon the otherness of nature requires a sense of humility on our part when making decisions that impact environments, ecosystems, and the creatures that populate those areas.

There have been many warnings against ignoring the unique value of Nature in its otherness from human beings, two of the most prominent voices being Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson. A large part of their concerns involved the specific destruction wrought upon forests, landscapes, and mountains by our pursuit of reshaping the natural world for human interests. Carson posits a frightening scenario in her *Silent Spring* where catastrophic and pervasive environmental degradation has left the natural world in its usual buzzing activity of rebirth eerily silent. Leopold recalls a pivotal experience in *The Sand County Almanac* where after slaughtering a pack of wolves simply because he could he witnessed a dying ‘green fire’ in a wolf mother’s eye that awakened the thought that something of great value had been lost. From there on in he began asking how to ‘think like a mountain.’ Both scenarios describe something irreducibly non-human whose absence leaves one with a recognition of a profound loss.

But what does it mean to ‘think like a mountain?’ Michael Nelson (2006) interprets this phrase as a call to reimagine the bounds of our moral community to extend beyond humans to recognize our place as a part of the larger biotic community. ‘Thinking like a mountain’ means embracing a more ecological and objective perspective regarding where humans belong within the environmental chain of interdependency. While this explanation is certainly something Leopold would agree with, this also tells us something important about the otherness of nature.

When we are invited to ‘think like a mountain’ by Leopold one of the first things that should strike us is the oddity of the request. Literally speaking, the perspective of a mountain is not something we can actually take up, so the importance of this imperative cannot be a literal prescription. Instead the value of the prescription lies simply in the recognition of the

disanalogy between human consciousness and mountains. In confronting Leopold's question we should realize how drastically different (or *Other*) mountains are in comparison to human beings. The concept of 'the Other' identifies a unique entity that differs substantively in a non-reductive way. To label something as 'Other' is to establish a gap that separates and distinguishes oneself from the Other. More specifically, it is an epistemic, or knowledge, gap in the sense that I am limited in my capacity to subsume the other within my knowledge (in other words, make it into something sufficiently similar to myself). If I am to understand the Other at all it must be on their terms and not my own. To 'think like a mountain' not only draws our attention to the ways we are a part of and dependent upon the larger ecological world, but shows how unique and different the parts are from one another. It is this sense of *otherness* that is lost in much environmental philosophy and this dimension of our relation to nature opens a way of understanding a sense of 'gratitude' for the unique and non-human dimensions of Nature.

Adopting an attitude of 'willing Nature to be what it is' requires recognizing and positively valuing Nature as it is and, thus, its unique value independent of human ends. Arendt's remarks regarding the '*volò ut sis*' in connection with her account of the fundamental uniqueness of each being simply in respect of being born (i.e. their natality) draws the strong connection between willing something to be what it is *in its uniqueness*. It is in this way that gratitude finds a natural kinship with a theory that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the otherness of Nature.

Simon Hailwood has developed a theory of the value of Nature centered upon its otherness that is particularly well suited for providing a picture of what gratitude towards Nature in the non-beneficiary sense looks like. Hailwood's conception of 'otherness' in nature is deeply connected to the independence of the natural world from that of the human world. 'Independence' here is understood as containing two separate claims: 1) the indifference of the natural world to humanity and 2) the absence of a moral community that

includes humanity.<sup>12</sup> The first claim follows from the self-sustainability of nature insofar as nature lacks any particular reliance upon humans in order to flourish and develop and the second claim builds off the independence thesis and poses a warning about anthropomorphizing Nature or interpreting Nature's ends in terms of human interests.

On Hailwood's account, any discussion of the value of Nature's otherness implies some way in which we separate the human and non-human aspects of Nature. To mark this division Hailwood incorporates the concept of 'landscape' to designate parts of the natural world that have been modified, molded, and engineered to fulfill human interests, which 'allows us to understand "nature as other" as nature insofar as it is independent of, or not determined by, the human-oriented significances attributed to it, and the modifications made to it, within local landscapes.' (Hailwood 2006, 175) Valuing the otherness of nature, then, requires adopting an attitude of minimizing human interference and refraining from 'landscaping' as much as possible. It is to recognize a 'negative end' that obligates us to refrain from intervention and that 'the greater the disruption to nature, the more powerful is the required justification.' (Hailwood 2006, 176) Gratitude understood as 'willing Nature to be what it is' endorses many of the same ideas here regarding the importance of the non-instrumental value of Nature as well as the prescription of refraining from intervention unless necessary. Allowing Nature to be what it is implies, at least, a certain degree of non-interference.

From these connections between Hailwood's Otherness account of the value of Nature and the understanding of gratitude as a virtue defended here it may appear that this position implies an uncompromising non-interventionist mindset regarding environmental scenarios. For example, wolf populations in certain areas have drastically fallen and one case

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<sup>12</sup> Hailwood explains the independence of nature specifically in reference to Keekok Lee's three theses, aptly labelled the "No Teleology Thesis," "Autonomy Thesis," and "Asymmetry Thesis." (Lee 1994) The claim regarding Nature's indifference that Hailwood makes incorporates the "Autonomy thesis" and "Asymmetry thesis" into one claim.

that has been studied extensively is the Isle Royale National Park in Lake Superior. Historically, levels of wolves had been fairly high (even up to 50 wolves on the remote island), but within the last ten years or so wolf populations have drastically dwindled with the most recent count being that there are two wolves left.<sup>13</sup> If the “natural” turn of events is that a species becomes endangered to the point of near extinction, then do we have any grounds for intervening and attempting to protect such species from becoming extinct or does this represent a disrespectful attitude towards Nature’s otherness? An important point to first recognize is that neither Hailwood’s account nor the virtue of gratitude requires that we *never* intervene in the Natural world. Such a standard would be impossible to uphold because our own survival requires intervention for the purposes of food, shelter, and other basic necessities. So, the idea here is not that we cannot ever justify intervention, but only that we must be cautious and thoughtful about the reasons why we do intervene. Andrew Brennan and Yeuk-Sze Lo in the anthology *Understanding Environmental Philosophy* offer a helpful rephrasing of this idea in the claim that ‘The best that an ecologically-motivated person can do is try to live as lightly on the earth as possible.’ (Brennan & Lo 2014, 71) ‘Living lightly’ does not mean never changing the natural world to suit certain human interests, but a genuine sense of gratitude that respects the value of Nature’s otherness would rather watch in wonder as the complex drama of an ecosystem’s various species plays itself out.<sup>14</sup>

However, the issue regarding endangered animals requires our involvement to rectify the way that the natural world has progressed and this, it may seem, is incompatible with the sense of gratitude for Nature’s otherness defended here. It is worth pointing out that a

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2018/06/07/officials-ok-plan-rebuild-isle-royale-wolf-population/681565002/>

<sup>14</sup> It should also be noted that this sense of gratitude for Nature’s otherness is wholly compatible with radical political and social movements to hold companies and governments that pollute and destroy the environment accountable. Individual life changes (such as recycling, composting, riding a bicycle to work rather than driving, etc.) that are sustainable are certainly good life changes and demonstrate a respect for nature, but they pale in comparison to industrial pollution and ecological devastation. However, once we seek to remedy these injustices we have moved beyond the sphere of gratitude into the demands of other environmental virtues.

consistent underlying cause for animal extinction has some connection to human activities that unsustainably and inefficiently use natural resources for luxury homes and shopping malls with perhaps the widest reaching impact coming from carbon emissions that contribute to global climate change. Animal poaching has long been a problem and the vain desire for ivory in certain Asian countries has directly contributed to severely reduced elephant populations in both Africa and Asia. The endangerment of the continued existence of these animals is not due to any ‘natural force’ or ‘natural changes,’ but specifically a result from treating the natural world and the beings that inhabit it as of mere instrumental value. Much of this problem results from a *lack* of gratitude for Nature’s otherness. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that Nature will on its own always preserve a species and many past extinctions throughout the development of the earth clearly have no connection to human intervention. In such cases of species endangerment, what does a virtue such as gratitude dictate? Refraining from involvement or a call for emergency intervention? There can be no ‘rule’ or answer that applies to every case, but can only be approached contextually as the nature of the virtues themselves are contextual. The question of whether human intervention is needed essentially depends upon an ability to talk about the role that species plays within the ecosystem in which it is becoming endangered. The slow and gradual disappearance of a species that contributes little or nothing to the flourishing of that ecosystem perhaps serves as an indication that the world is no longer suitable to such a species and it must either evolve and adapt or live on in the earth’s fossil record.<sup>15</sup> In such a situation human involvement may involve a certain hubris or arrogance in controlling nature and landscaping it to fit our perceptions of what the natural world *should* look like. However, this case is very different from one in which a sudden and drastic shift in a species population (due to the introduction of disease or a calamitous event) leads to the endangerment of a species. If we assume that

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<sup>15</sup> Holmes Rolston raises a helpful distinction between ‘human created extinction’ and ‘natural extinction’ that makes a similar point to the one I am making here in terms of gratitude. See “Duties to Endangered Species” in *BioScience* Vol. 35, No. 11 (Dec. 1985), pp. 718-726

such a species would still play a significant role in the health of that particular ecosystem, then human intervention in protecting such creatures from extinction would seem legitimately in line with a sense of gratitude that wills Nature to be what it is. If we look at the question of justifiable intervention in light of the relationship between two friends we find very similar questions that are raised in regard to what it would mean to adopt the attitude of '*volo ut sis*' that Arendt applies amongst humans. Willing a friend to be who they are is a concern to foster their capacity for free and individual expression (what might constitute their 'otherness' in a sense), which will often require refraining from intervening and controlling their life, but may *require* in certain cases that you get involved when they are in danger of losing control or considering options that will threaten their life. By 'getting involved' here it is not meant that the friend takes over their life or makes the choices for them, but that they provide the conditions for the friend to return to a state of stability and pursue their flourishing. While there is no parallel dialogue to be had with the natural world, the idea here is that intervening can be consistent with a sense of gratitude for Nature's otherness in that we can help restore the conditions for stability in which a once flourishing ecosystem can regain its health. Questions regarding the best course of action for stabilizing an ecosystem or when and in which ways to get involved will likely move beyond gratitude itself and into other virtues (such as benevolence, courage, honesty, and other intellectual virtues), but the important and key point here is that human involvement can be consistent with willing Nature to be what it is.

But what are we to say about cases where we do not value the way the non-human natural world is? It may seem that the account presented here implies that gratitude is an overarching rule or principle that ought to guide *all* our interactions with the various flora and fauna in the world. The problem that arises from such an understanding is that there are many situations in which it makes little sense for us to adopt such an attitude. For example, the complex destructive power of a cancer cell may qualify as something awe-inspiring, but

gratitude does not seem to be the appropriate attitude to take. In fact, it may be the complete opposite in this case where we would wish it not to be what it is. In the mundane or banal cases there may be something still to be said about valuing the existence of things as they are and avoiding the temptation to modify an environment merely because we are inconvenienced.<sup>16</sup> But what are we to say about the more serious cases where human lives are threatened? Are we really supposed to appreciate the environment for what it is when it can wreak such destruction, devastation, and death?

The concern raised here suggests that gratitude may not simply be an *irrelevant* attitude in certain circumstances, but a downright *immoral* attitude in those circumstances. If this is intended as an objection, then the error in this kind of worry is that it treats gratitude as a moral rule that must apply universally to each and every case, rather than as a character disposition in a virtuous person who knows when gratitude is appropriate. Gratitude is one virtue amongst many and there is no necessary reason for why we must think gratitude ought to be a relevant moral consideration in each and every moral situation nor does it lose its significance as a virtue if it is not always a relevant moral consideration. A student's resisting the temptation to cheat on an exam does not require the virtue of generosity, but this does not mean generosity is unimportant or not at work in the background. Similarly with gratitude, there may be situations where gratitude does not play a central role, but like all the other virtues they are important considerations on the mind of every virtuous agent.

Lastly, it may seem that talk of human involvement in the natural world presumes a kind of knowledge of Nature that epistemically conflicts with understanding the otherness of Nature. Hailwood is quite clear that his view, as well as the one of gratitude defended here,

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<sup>16</sup> Val Plumwood was viciously attacked by a crocodile while travelling through the Kakadu National Park in Australia and famously rejected plans to hunt down and kill the predatory crocodile saying 'I was the intruder, and no good purpose could be served by random revenge.' (Plumwood 2000) In a shorter essay entitled 'Prey to a Crocodile' she writes 'Crocodiles and other creatures that can take human life also present a test of our acceptance of our ecological identity. When they're allowed to live freely, these creatures indicate our preparedness to coexist with the otherness of the earth, and to recognize ourselves in mutual, ecological terms, as part of the food chain, eaten as well as eater.' (Plumwood 2002)

is that nature's otherness does not erase our capacity to recognize both the similarities and differences between humans and the non-human natural world. If the concept of 'otherness' prohibited a capacity to know anything about the other, then the concept itself would be self-contradictory. To recognize that something is different *requires* that you at least know what is different. Thus, the very label of 'otherness' implies a certain degree of knowledge about one thing in relation to oneself. For Hailwood, 'The otherness view assumes that there is a really existing nature independent of humanity, that we can know things about it and that science can deepen that knowledge; our descriptions of external nature can map onto how things are, at least sufficiently well for them not merely to reflect purely human interests, concerns and conventions.' (Hailwood 2004, 19) Respecting nature for its otherness necessarily involves *avoiding* anthropomorphism and *fostering* a curiosity and humility regarding the conditions of flourishing unique to individual species. We reduce nature anthropomorphically when we overemphasize the similarities and interrelation between humans and nature and fail to be humble in the confidence of our technical ingenuity to resolve the crises that our technology has driven us into. Hailwood's otherness view provides a framework for recognizing the limitations upon the way we can treat the environment and the notion of gratitude builds the concern for otherness into a virtuous disposition and attitude.

### *Conclusion*

We began this analysis by taking seriously White's imperative to 'accommodate ourselves to this planet and view it appreciatively.' So, what is it like to approach the non-human natural world through the lens of gratitude? Put simply it is to understand oneself as a guest or traveler within that world; as a being with no inherent right to have its existence supported and fostered by that world and with no right to imperialistically demand such a world reshape and meet their expectations. Of course, travelers are not merely passive

observers when travelling to another culture, but often interact and may even provide help and assistance to others while there. However, they should tread lightly and with a sense of gratitude seek to find their place in such a world. From a perspective of gratitude we understand that we have no inherent right to demand change, modification, or the rearrangement of a world to suit our desires. When we do seek to change or modify such a place we ought to feel the moral impetus to collaborate with the indigenous beings to see whether our desires can be made compatible with those of the other creatures living there. Such an approach emphasizes the Arendtian use of '*volo ut sis*' and the expression of the value that the natural world is what it is.

The hope is that gratitude offers us a way of appreciating nature in its beauty, complexity, and sacred separateness from ourselves, while nevertheless recognizing those aspects we do share, such as the basic biological requirements of sustenance, rest, growth, and development. Nelson embodies this approach writing 'If, in Nature, we are more impressed by its essentially contingent, and hence unpredictable character, then our relationship will be more strongly rooted in living within the boundaries of Nature's beautifully dynamic variation.' (Nelson 2019) Gratitude tries to capture the feeling of appreciation for the way nature exists in all its mystery, complexity, and danger. I would like to believe it is analogous to, if not the same, transformative feeling that Leopold experienced witnessing the dying green fire in the wolf mother's eye.

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