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Relational values: the key to pluralistic valuation of ecosystem services

Austin Himes¹ and Barbara Muraca²

Multiple frameworks have recently been proposed adopting relational values as a new domain of value articulation distinct from the dichotomy of intrinsic and instrumental values that has dominated environmental ethics for decades. In this article, we distinguish between the innate relationality of all evaluative process and relational values as the content of valuation which is a new and fruitful category for expressing the importance of specific relationships people hold with non-human nature. We examine the concept of relational values used in recent frameworks and propose a simple conceptualization with clear distinctions between relational, instrumental, and intrinsic (inherent moral) values. We argue that as a new category of value articulation, relational values provide conceptual and empirical insights that the intrinsic/instrumental value dichotomy fails to deliver. Finally, we draw on theoretical and empirical research to show why a clear distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental relational values is important for environmental conservation, sustainability, and social justice.

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Introduction

Since the introduction of the term ‘relational values’ as an analytical framework to assess the ways people articulate the importance of ecosystem services in their specific, socio-culturally embedded language of valuation, the concept has been employed in several theoretical studies and tested empirically. In this paper, we provide a short overview of the term by first distinguishing between the

relationality inherent in all valuation processes and the specific articulations of relational values as used in taxonomies [1[•]] and classifications [2[•]]. We then present and critically discuss how intrinsic, instrumental, and relational values are employed in the literature, and articulate the need for differentiating relational values that are *anthropo-centric yet non-instrumental*. We show why this difference is crucial for the way we conceive of and implement value formation. Besides the framework of moral obligations towards non-human entities and merely instrumental benefits of ecosystem services to people, we argue that a more sophisticated consideration of non-instrumental, relational values and a pluralistic approach to value articulation are needed to fully understand how and why people care about non-human nature. We reject the either/or mentality of the intrinsic versus instrumental value debate and suggest that non-instrumental relational values fill a gap left by inadequacies and ambiguities in the common application of the instrumental/intrinsic paradigm.

Relational values: a new category of value assessment

Relational values are included in many recent frameworks and hierarchies proposed for the valuation of ecosystem services. Muraca’s [3] formative contribution proposed the concept of relational values in a theoretical framework aimed at representing normative judgments about non-human nature. More recently, the IPBES (Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) has included, in addition to instrumental values, the category of relational values in its conceptual framework to address nature’s benefits to people [2[•],4,5]. IPBES describes relational values as “ . . . imbedded in desirable (sought after) relationships, including those between people and nature . . . ” [4]. The IPBES framework embraces relational values as a departure from the economic valuation framework that commonly dominates assessments of ecosystem services and nature’s benefits to people [4].

Critics question that relational values can be adequately articulated as distinct from instrumental and intrinsic values [6,7]. For example, against the IPBES framework Mair and Feest [7] claim that relational value is not an adequate analytical category and serves no purpose, because all values and desires are in principle relational. While we agree that all valuation processes are ultimately relational, we make the case in this paper that relational values are a fruitful category of classification if the contents of valuation that mirror different ways of

understanding, articulating or expressing the importance of specific forms of relationships with non-human nature are clearly distinguished from the inherently relational nature of valuation.

Processes of valuation as fundamentally relational versus relational value as the content of valuation

We make a distinction throughout this paper between the *process of valuation* and the *content of valuation*. The *process of valuation* refers to how it occurs that something we encounter becomes important, significant, or worth our attention. The *content of valuation* is the product of the *process of valuation* and it refers to *what* is valued and how the value is *attributed* and *articulated*. We believe this distinction resolves confusion described by Muradian and Pascual (in this special issue) around use of the term ‘relational values,’ and the general relational nature of valuation.

With respect to their nature and genesis, all valuations are essentially relational. Valuations are neither entirely produced by the observer nor inherent to the thing but arise in the space of encounter where the subject and objects originate [1*,8*]. Thus, the genesis of valuations is not merely subjective nor only objective but rather constitutive of both. Even before we identify ‘things’ and judge them, a vague and non-conscious sense of importance guides and elicits our attention to ‘something that matters’ [8*]. In daily life, we don’t first run into an object, then observe it, and then judge it, rather we are already immersed in value-led relationships that evoke what matters and becomes thereby an object for us. A good example is the relationship one has with their native language. We are embedded in a non-neutral relationship with our native language that is independent of our actual preferences about it. It constitutes our identity and the realities we relate to; it thus shapes the horizon of possibility for the expression of our preferences. In a similar way, all processes of valuation are rooted in forms of embeddedness and importance that are constitutive of who we are but are often unexpressed and outside our conscious awareness. In this sense it is possible to talk about relational value with respect to the fundamental and immediate feeling of ‘importance, worth, or significance that something has for an individual’ [9,10] and that sustains any process of value formation.

In a more specific sense, the orientation of importance towards the world is mediated, influenced, and co-determined by socially shared horizons of meaning that form shared narratives, institutions, norms, and habitualized practices. The way in which we come to consider something as important, is the result of the social processes of value formation and transformation [11–13].

With respect to the content of valuation (*what* is considered important and how this attribution of importance is articulated), relational values enable a space, both forming and eliciting values, in which anthropocentric, yet non-instrumental, relationships to nature can be expressed. Technically speaking, relational values can refer to the articulation of both instrumental and non-instrumental relations [3: 8]. Following more recent literature, we employ here the term in a narrower sense with reference to non-instrumental relationships. Such relationships are not reducible to mere means to some humans’ end, but constitute who we are as humans. They are deeper and more complex than merely instrumental ones [14]. Following Chan *et al.* [15**], relational values refer to ‘preferences, principles, and virtues associated with relationships, both interpersonal and as articulated by policies and social norms’ [15**: 1462]. They include action, experiences, and habits associated with the ‘good life’ in the sense of a meaningful, ethically responsible, and overall satisfying life, or what is called eudaimonic values. They do not refer to things but derive from ‘relationships and responsibilities to them’ [15**: 1462]. In this second meaning, relational values are an indispensable category of classification that expands the perspective on valuation and enables a more adequate and pluralistic assessment of value [1*]. A pluralistic approach not only captures the variety of ways people express why they value what they call nature [16,17], but also enables a multiplicity of perspectives and valuation languages to be employed on their own terms, thus supporting collective and reflexive processes of value formation.

Relational values enable more adequate articulation of values than the intrinsic/instrumental dichotomy

With respect to the content and not the nature of valuation in recent environmental literature, relational values are generally framed as a third alternative to the traditional intrinsic/instrumental dichotomy that is rooted in environmental ethics and nature conservation debates [3,15**,18–20]. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment reinforced the intrinsic/instrumental dichotomy in the context of ecosystem services by invoking the Kantian logic that an entity can have either a *price* or a *dignity* [21]. In environmental valuation and ecosystem service literature, the definition of instrumental values is generally clear-cut: things that are means to some external end. However, different and contradictory meanings are often conflated with respect to intrinsic value, in order to capture independence from human needs, meanings, and preferences as well as values that are relational but are non-instrumental. The clarification of the concept of relational values to address specifically non-instrumental relations offers a solution to this contradictory use. Following O’Neill [22], we claim that we may value something (1) in virtue of its relation to other objects, but independently of human needs, meanings,

interests or preferences which corresponds to the common use of intrinsic value, or (2) in virtue of its specific relations to people. Such relationships can refer to either (2a) a constitutive component for flourishing (a good human life, i.e. a life worthy of a human being [23]), including moral responsibility and care for the flourishing of other beings and the foundations of our socio-cultural self-understanding,³ or (2b) in virtue of it being instrumental (means to an end) to satisfy human needs and preferences [22: ff14]. Accordingly, instrumental values overlap to a certain extent with relational values, as they both refer to human-nature relationships, but do not correspond exactly and one may be present without the other.

IPBES defines intrinsic values as ‘values inherent to nature, independent of human judgment’ [2: 9] and as non-anthropocentric [2^{*}]. This definition is confusing as it conflates three different meanings of intrinsic: firstly, referring to inherent, non-relational, properties of objects, secondly, independent of human valuation and judgment, and thirdly, bearers of inherent moral value as ends-in-themselves and subjects with their own good [22]. We have to draw an important distinction between *epistemic anthropocentrism*, which means that knowledge and judgments are always human-centered and that valuations must come from a human perspective, and *moral anthropocentrism*, which states only humans are bearer of values and worthy of direct moral consideration. According to Batavia and Nelson [24], morally non-anthropocentric, intrinsic values (non-human entities deserving direct moral consideration for their own sake) are essential for nature conservation and reflect the motivation of environmental activists and scientists. This is supported by empirical evidence [14,25^{*},26] and theoretical analyses [3,8^{*},27]. By this definition, intrinsic values are a powerful motivator for conservation on moral grounds but are outside the scope of evaluation of nature’s contribution to people or ecosystem services [28].

It is difficult to imagine non-anthropocentric values in the epistemic sense. IPBES uses the term intrinsic value to address ecological functions as they are described by scientific research. Now, how can ecological processes—defined as inherent to nature—be independent of human judgment or of ‘any human consideration of its worth and importance’ [4: 4], if they are articulated via scientific research, that is human research that assesses its ecological importance? It is likely that the intention of Diaz *et al.* [4] is to highlight the distinction between values that are independent of expressed human interests or preferences (but not judgment!) and those that refer to direct benefits to people, both in the sense of means—goods and services (instrumental)—and in the sense of

constituents of a good life (relational). To avoid confusion, we plead to reserve the use of the term intrinsic values to the attribution of inherent moral value to entities that can be legitimately considered as subjects-of-a-life or ends in themselves in a moral sense.

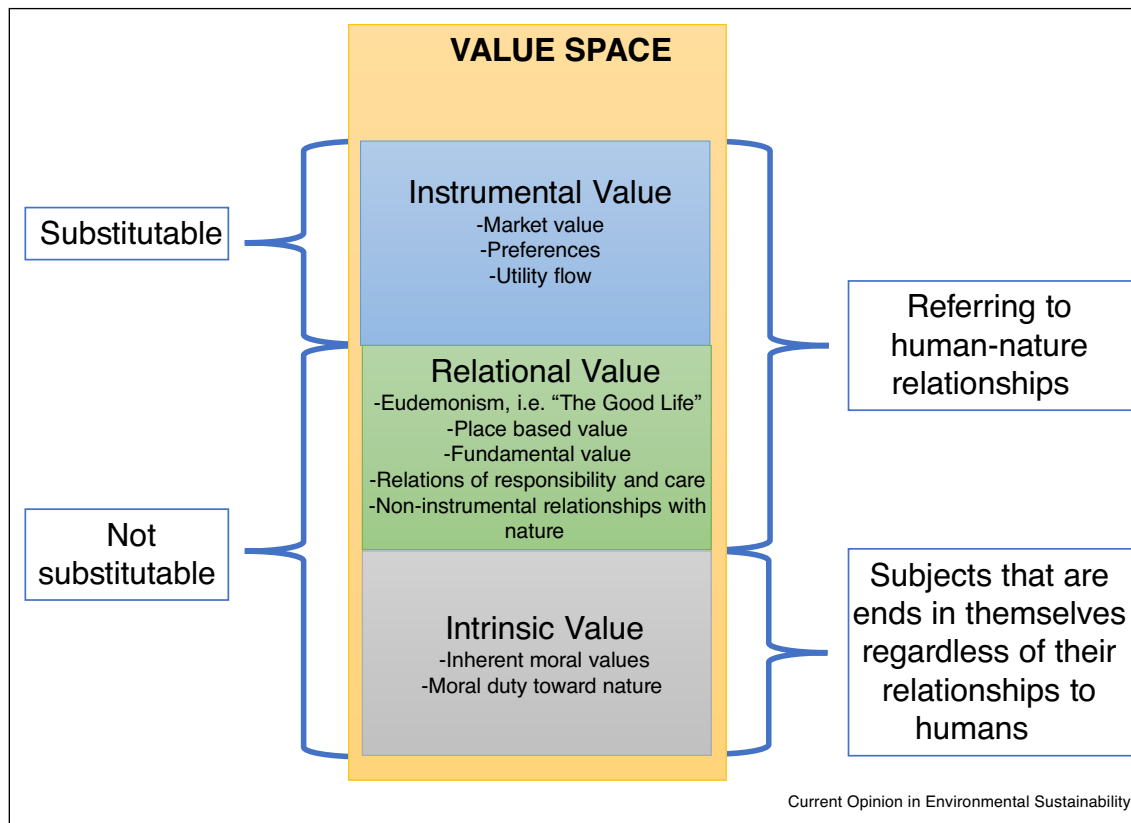
Instrumental, intrinsic, and non-instrumental relational values are distinct and not commensurable, but they are connected and can be simultaneously present in a common framework that embodies the complexity of how people articulate how and why non-human nature matters to them. Excluding one form of value articulation or reducing all to one type result in negatively biased assessment of value (see Figure 1) [1^{*},29]. Arias-Arévalo *et al.* [1^{*},25^{*}] classify between three different narratives that cannot be aggregated into synthesis assessments and corresponds to the three value typologies: gaining from nature (instrumental), living for nature (intrinsic in the sense of the direct moral consideration of nonhuman subjects of a life), and living in nature (relational). In recent environmental literature relational values are associated with embeddedness, collective meaning, flourishing, heritage, beauty, self-transformation, sense of place, spirituality, livelihoods, justice, conviviality, care, and kinship [25^{*},26,30–34].

Empirical studies show that eudaimonic values, including aesthetic and spiritual values, play a key role for the motivation to act for biodiversity and nature conservation [14,26,35]. Relational values are important components of wellbeing and a meaningful life. Gould *et al.* [32] showed that relational values, such as kinship with nonhuman entities and social relationships, were commonly expressed during interviews designed to understand cultural ecosystem services in two very different communities. Dawson and Martin [36] found that Rwandans of different cultural and historical backgrounds varied in the way they valued provisioning ecosystem services. Relational values such as connectedness, place attachment, and components of ‘living a good life’ all ranked highly among reasons Europeans were motivated to care about biodiversity [26]. Kaltenborn *et al.* [37^{*}] found that people in the fishing community of Röst Norway derived benefits from ecosystem services that went beyond satisfied preferences and material acquisition and included relational values essential to ‘living a good life in Röst,’ including struggle, hardships, and capabilities that tied people to their environment and the challenge of their work. The relational benefits identified as essential to the ‘good life in Röst,’ were important to community and individual identities. Relational values are relevant to broad groups of people and are held distinct from both instrumental and intrinsic values [38].

Finally, relational values are essential to adequately represent non-Western languages of valuation. An example is the web of relationships that constitute the living territory

³ This is close to the meaning of non-instrumental relational values as we use it here.

Figure 1



Distinction between instrumental, relational, and intrinsic values of nature.

Both instrumental and relational values are fundamentally rooted in the relationships people have with nature and each other while intrinsic values are independent of a specific relation to human interests, needs, preferences, and meanings. Instrumental values are substitutable while relational and intrinsic values are not. Finally, the value space is not completely occupied by these three typologies leaving open the possibility that other distinct value domains to exist.

of Indigenous people inhabited and shared by human and nonhuman beings [30]. Different names are used to address this constitutive web of relationships, such as earth, country, or Pachamama (Mother Earth). The protection or conservation of 'nature' independently of humans makes little sense in the context of this web: "relations between people, animals, physical objects, and indeed spiritual entities simply 'happen, they carry on, they are their stories'" [39: 175]. "They and their relations are in this way forever 'alive' and dynamic, continuously woven together into the fabric of the world" [30: 124].

Instrumental versus non-instrumental relations: a difference that makes a difference

There is no inherent characteristic of an entity that in and of itself can justify the attribution of instrumental or non-instrumental value to it. Thus, in principle, any content of valuation can be framed in terms of instrumental or non-instrumental relationships [8^{*}; 25^{*}], depending on the context of reference. However, the way in which values are articulated and assigned bears on significant

differences with respect to the space of possible action [40], including policies, individual and collective behavior, motivation settings of social actors, and implications of social, environmental, and epistemic (in)justice.

The process of value formation is reflexive [41], that is it operates through critical reconsiderations and transformations in the social realm. As empirical studies suggest [42], valuation methods operate as *value articulating institutions*, which influence value formation and co-determine value themselves [11], instead of just eliciting pre-existing values [17,43]. For example, assessments that neglect the reflexivity in the process of value formation and claim to take manifested preferences as unquestionably given de facto performatively contribute to form values that exclude collective processes or institutional settings through which values are typically discussed, questioned, and transformed [44,45].

Instrumental language masks alternative modes of relating to nature. Value articulation frameworks that do not

consider relational values ignore historic power imbalances between different cultural views of human nature relationships, hiding underlying social power relations [46]. For example, articulating the value of Pacific salmon in terms of only instrumental values silences the specific languages through which Indigenous People express their deep and multifaceted relationship with salmon and their relational web. Ignoring this specific language of valuation perpetuates the forced assimilation to the settler's narrative. Under these circumstances, merely offering a monetary compensation for the loss of their fisheries leads to the perverse use of market logic to justify or veil modern echoes of past colonial atrocities. Policy guided by merely instrumental metrics can appear successful but have severely negative impacts on the wellbeing of local communities who are most affected if relational values are neglected [47] and heterogeneous languages of valuation are forced into an instrumental framework.

Values associated with cultural ecosystem services or with aesthetic and spiritual meanings often refer to non-substitutable components of a good human life. Forcing these languages of valuation into an instrumental framework leaves them ill-defined and neglects the complexity and specificity of relations articulated by the people in their own terms [48]. In fact, directly implied by the definition of instrumental values is that objects, in so far as they are means to ends, are substitutable. Any combination of objects that achieves the same desired ends would have equivalent value if only their instrumental contributions to wellbeing are considered. Instrumental consideration enables the abstraction from the specific context of reference and from the qualitative, often unrepeatable, characteristics of particular relationships with nature. Moreover, because money operates as the universal equivalent of any exchange value, instrumental consideration provides a gateway to commodification and marketization of nature [49]. Through the market logic the qualitative and context-specific characteristics of relationships (in this case with non-human nature) are concealed behind the fetishized value of a commodity [49]. As a value articulating institution, the market acts as a performative space through which human-nature relationships are (re)constructed in instrumental terms [50].

Finally, instrumental language implies one-directional flow of benefits and masks not only the reciprocity of human-nature relationships in terms of care or *services to the ecosystems* [30,34,51], but also the mediation and co-construction of ecosystem services via human material and cultural activity [52,53]. West *et al.* (this special issue) assert that approaches to environmental sustainability myopically focused on market-based instrumental values ignore the relational value of care which reciprocates and nurtures wellbeing between humans and non-human nature. Means to an end logic of instrumental language precludes the possibility that the means themselves may

be important. Jax *et al.* (this special issue) further articulate the reciprocity of human-nature relationships through feminist theory, positing that caring *for* nature is constitutive of part of a living a good human life.

Conclusion

Existing frameworks and typologies of relational values vary, but we believe the framework presented in this paper unifies common key components and provides clear defining principles that will facilitate future discussion and streamline operationalization of relational values into frameworks for ecosystem services and nature's benefits to people. The framing of relational values in this article addresses the criticism that relational values are not a distinct or useful categorization of value, and it fills a void in value articulation left by the inadequacies and inconsistency of the instrumental/intrinsic value dichotomy. Empirical research supports that relational values are important to people and considered distinct from both intrinsic and instrumental values. The inclusion of relational values in pluralistic methods of valuation enables greater epistemic justice, makes power asymmetries visible, and offers a framework for the articulation of human-nature relationships that challenges the Western dichotomic model of either conserving nature for its own sake (wilderness) or securing the utility flow of natural capital (instrumentality, eco-efficiency) [54,55].

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