

Invited paper

## RELATIONAL VALUES: A WHITEHEADIAN ALTERNATIVE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper I develop a framework for environmental philosophy on the ground of what I call a radical relationalism based on Whitehead's thought. Accordingly, relations are ontologically prior to and constitutive of entities rather than being conceived as external link(ing) between them. On this ground an alternative, relational axiology can be developed that challenges the current environmental ethics debate and its dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental values. In the last section, I show how such an axiology can become an important ally for global environmental justice struggles and help support what the anthropologist Arturo Escobar calls a "decolonial view of nature."

**Key words:** relational values, Whitehead, axiology, environmental justice, decolonizing nature.

### **1. Introduction**

Although Alfred North Whitehead himself never wrote anything about environmental issues, a large body of literature has been produced in environmental ethics from a Whiteheadian perspective. Whitehead scholars have engaged with classical topics of the environmental ethics debate ranging from axiological consideration to deontological models in an original and challenging way. In the big family of Whiteheadian environmental ethics,

different positions along the established framework of the so-called demarcation problem (which non-human entities are to be considered as members of the moral community) have been articulated (such as for example sentientism or biocentrism), as well as original contributions to ecofeminism or ecotheology.<sup>1</sup>

My contribution in this paper sidesteps the debate within Whiteheadian environmental ethics to a certain extent and aims at developing a more detailed analysis of what the consequences are for an environmental philosophy rooted in what I call a *radical relationalism*. In this section I will briefly reconstruct Whitehead's philosophy with respect to a radical relationalism, and in the following section on environmental philosophy and axiology I will outline on this ground an alternative axiology for environmental ethics. In the last section, I will show that a relational axiology inspired by Whitehead can become an important ally for environmental justice struggles and help support a "decolonial view of nature."

By *radical relationalism* I mean that, from a Whiteheadian point of view, relations are ontologically prior to and constitutive of entities rather than being conceived as external link(ing) between them. Understanding relations has been haunting modern science since its very beginning, with its culmination

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Dombrowski 1997, McDaniel 1989, Howell 2000. For a detailed presentation of the different positions see Muraca 2008.

in Hume's skeptical critique of causation. As we can learn from Whitehead, if the fundamental structure of reality is conceived in terms of discrete bits of matter *simply located*<sup>2</sup> in time and space, relations between entities are reduced to external links that cannot be observed, but only inferred on the ground of habit and association, as Hume rightly remarked. Generally, according to this theoretical framework, relations have been considered to be universals that link entities in the medium of thought and language (AI 231). This sounds rather obvious as long as relations are considered to be merely abstract possibilities.<sup>3</sup> However, thus conceived, "a relation cannot signify the actual connectedness of the actual individual things which constitute the actual course of history" (AI 231) as Whitehead, by drawing on Bradley, remarks. The problem remains how relations could *actually* relate discrete entities (AI 231). Whitehead agrees here with Bradley that an "inclusive whole" as underlying unity is needed in order to understand the actual connectedness of the world, where relations are not merely external, mechanical, or logical links framed by language. Such an inclusive whole is ultimately given in experience: "the connectedness of things is nothing else than the togetherness of things in occasions of experience" (AI 234). So far Whitehead is moving within the tradition of modern philosophy, from Hume to Kant and, as already mentioned, the Hegelian Bradley. The underlying unity grounding the association or connection between entities is the unification *a parte subjecti* given in experience.<sup>4</sup> It is with the next sen-

tence that Whitehead marks all the difference from that very tradition and its understanding of experience as limited to human knowledge and language when he writes: "Of course such occasions are only rarely occasions of human experience" (*ibidem*). Experience as we know it serves as a model to explain how the *actuality* of relations can be conceived, but extends as a mode of unification to the whole ontological realm. In Whitehead's pluralist ontology this is best summarized by his famous phrase "the many become one and are increased by one" (PR 21): the unification process in one particular occasion of experience might virtually comprise the whole universe, but it is still one specific actualization that adds up to innumerable others. Bradley's inclusive whole opens up here into a multiplicity of processes of actualization modeled on experience.

### 1.1 Radical Relationalism

Let me albeit briefly illustrate the idea of radical relationalism in the following paragraphs. The first and most original grasping of something—the form of experience that Whitehead used to call sense-awareness in *Concept of Nature*—is not the observation of an isolated entity, a *bare individuality* unclothed of its properties and relations by the abstraction of thought, but a complex occurrence embedded in a web of constitutive relations that include the emotional disposition of the act of grasping itself.

<sup>2</sup> Simple location is a technical term in Process Philosophy and refers to the assumption that entities or objects are simply located in space and time, i.e. that they do not need any relation to other spatiotemporal regions for their constitution. Against this Whitehead writes: "The volumes of space have no independent existence. They are only entities as within the totality; you cannot extract them from their environment without destruction of their very essence" (SMW 65).

<sup>3</sup> For Whitehead abstract relations are indeed universals out of time and space (he calls them for this reason *eternal objects*), but only as logical possibilities or as potentialities for actualization. Actualization occurs only by means of the actual combination of real-possible relations within and by a *concrete* occasion of experience, as I will explain later.

<sup>4</sup> By drawing on Whitehead, Hanna Arendt criticizes this basic assumption of modern philosophy. According to Arendt, the modern tradition of thought is rooted in the rather peculiar idea that the commonality of the world is guaranteed by the structure of our minds. However, as she

writes, "what men now have in common is not the world but the structure of their minds, and this they cannot have in common, strictly speaking; their faculty of reasoning can only happen to be the same in everybody" (Arendt 1958, 283). With reference to Whitehead, Arendt claims that instead it is the common world—the horizon for commonality—to which we have access in common sense. Common sense presupposes a common world previous to the perception and representation of it within the mind. Arendt implies that before modernity, common sense used to precede the other senses, giving them a common root and environment beyond differences of expressions, activities, and experiences. In the post-Cartesian tradition, to the contrary, common sense has become a mere "inner faculty without any world relationship" (*ibidem*). We could say with Whitehead that the access to the commonality of the world is not primarily given or constructed by abstract thought, but found in the most fundamental and primordial form of experience, one that does not even require consciousness to occur: it is experience as a general "taking into account" and literally "taking in" the influences of all that is—with different degrees of relevance—in the immediate past of an occurrence, an occasion of experience.

Relations constitute experience insofar as they—as casual influences, affections, vectors of feeling etc.—*grow together* (in Latin: *cum-crescere*) into the novel and original form<sup>5</sup> of an occasion of experience and thus become *concrete*.<sup>6</sup> As we can infer from our specific and complex mode of experience, grasping is at the same time a process constituted by impressions entering our senses and by the unique mode in which they are taken in and combined into a new, subjective form (indeed a *Gestalt*). This all happens—and here is where Whitehead parts company with Kant—without the guidance of a higher level of abstraction conveyed by thought (intuitions can be blind for Whitehead!). In experience relations are not external links, but constitutive vectors of feeling.

However, for Whitehead experience is not limited to beings endowed with consciousness or self-consciousness, but is a fundamental-ontological mode of relation that explains the very connectedness of the world. He names experience the process by which relations internally constitute a (new) form by flowing into and being taken in by a creative process of actualization: the inclusive whole mentioned by Bradley is not an underlying entity that precedes the process, but it is the process itself and its very outcome.<sup>7</sup> By understanding our own experience we gain access to the understanding of *actual, constitutive relatedness*. The actual connectedness of the world that neither the materialism of modern science—preoccupied with the adventures of matter in space—nor atomistic logic—reducing relations to external links or abstract universals—can explain,

<sup>5</sup> Although Whitehead did not use it, I would rather use here the German term “Gestalt” to translate what he calls subjective form. Form here is not intended as opposite to content, but it is what Whitehead calls a “conrescence,” literally a growing together of different influences into a coherent, new reality or actual entity (Muraca 2010). Conrescence is a process of *gestalten*.

<sup>6</sup> A concrete entity is the result of a process of conrescence; it stems from a successful combination of contrasting possibilities into a new, complex unity.

<sup>7</sup> For the sake of brevity I cannot reconstruct Whitehead’s argument for the necessary assumption that experience is the fundamental mode of actualization. Whitehead develops a complex argument based on the thorny question about how to conceive time in non-spatialized terms, which implies the idea of a relation of something with itself, i.e. the concept of internal, constitutive relations. Experience is the mode through which we know how this works. For a detailed analysis of this argument see Muraca 2010 and 2014.

can be conceived and justified only on the basis of actual occurrences (or occasions) constituted by internal relations that are combined in a concrete togetherness.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Relational Axiology

Whitehead’s radical relationalism challenges the traditional axiology of environmental ethics, both in terms of the very understanding of the “nature” of values and with regard to the axiological classification commonly used on the ground of the demarcation problem that sets up the criteria for the moral consideration of nonhuman entities (Muraca 2010 and 2011). By following Whitehead, we can move beyond the Western, modern tradition of thought and the canon of environmental ethics rooted in it, thus welcoming alternative axiologies more sensitive to non-Western languages of valuation and different tradition of environmentalism, as I will show in the last section of this paper.

### 2.1. The relational nature of value

#### 2.1.1 Beyond primary and secondary qualities

Although some scholars in environmental ethics plead for axiological objectivism and claim that values are inherent properties of entities and can (or not) be discovered and acknowledged by humans,<sup>9</sup> the large majority follow an axiological subjectivism. Such a position holds that the source of values is the valuation by subjects, i.e. beings endowed with the ability to discern or to classify the objects of experience according to better or worse and to attribute a value to them. According to *epistemic anthropocentrism*, only humans can be subjects of

<sup>8</sup> When discussing the specific mode of living beings to coordinate creativity with relative, temporary stability, we can speak with Whitehead of novelty by combination: the concrete fact is the result of a process in which different, partly contrasting elements are combined into a novel Gestalt.

<sup>9</sup> Holmes Rolston holds a intermediate position which has some similarities with the Whiteheadian perspective that I am presenting below. He claims that values are not in the eye of the observer, but rely on the objective reality of the generative process, which we call nature. Accordingly, values are “out there” in the world independently from human evaluators, but “coagulate” in the world by means of humans’ acknowledgment. Far from being a trivial axiological realism, Rolston’s position seeks a bridge between subjectivists and objectivists (Rolston 1988; see for a comparison with a Whiteheadian perspective Muraca 2010).

valuation (Krebs 1997; Norton 1991), and there are no values “out there” independently from humans' attribution.<sup>10</sup> Processes of valuation are conceived as a cognitive activity at the level of the faculty of judgment, something that only self-conscious and rational beings possess. Other scholars have extended the ability to value to beings endowed with consciousness, such as more complex animals.

The main argument against axiological objectivism is based on the famous Lockean distinction between primary qualities, which inherently belong to nature itself and are measurable, and secondary qualities which arise in the percipient subject. In this framework values are considered as supervenient to both other types of qualities and are therefore often called *tertiary qualities*, as Ott remarks: “Tertiary qualities are not to be regarded as objective properties of things but as interpretations of perceptions according to some underlying needs, wants, desires or cultural standards” (Ott 2003, 155). Hence, values follow the perception of objects and attach an emotional tone to it according to the model: a subject *S* evaluates *x* as better or worse than (or as good as) *y* (ibidem). The evaluation is based on a consideration of states of minds that *follows* experience as the perception of something (be it an entity or a situation).

From a Whiteheadian point of view, this argument holds only on the ground of the previous, non-manifested assumption of a strict separation between subject and object in experience and of the understanding of relations as external links. In this framework experience is held to be neutral in its first instance and only in a further step does it ‘color’ the object with an emotional, valuing tone.<sup>11</sup> Even call-

ing Locke in as an authority here fails to consider that secondary qualities arise in the relational locus<sup>12</sup> where the encounter between perceived object and perceiver occurs and are not—for sure not for Locke—just in the perceiver. Locke did introduce the category of tertiary qualities, but referred them to the mere powers something has to affect or being affected by something else (with no relation to perception or valuation). It was Samuel Alexander who in 1920, inspired by Locke, suggested using the term *tertiary qualities* to address value, thus stressing precisely their essentially relational nature. Alexander acknowledged at the same time that properly speaking values cannot be considered as qualities because they neither inhere in the object nor in the subject. Rather, they are *subject-object determinations*, a new character of reality, “which arise through the combination of mind with its object” to form a compound whole (Alexander 1920, 244ff.).

If values are neither a *parte subjecti* nor a *parte objecti*, but emerge in their encounter, the longstanding controversy between value objectivism and value subjectivism stays on the wrong footing. This is where value relationalism comes into play.

Let me explain this in two steps. First of all, Whitehead challenges the very distinction between primary and secondary qualities, which is based on what he called the *theories of the bifurcation of nature* (CN 26ff). At the dawn of the Western tradition of thought, modern sciences, driven by the urgent need to rely on “irreducible and stubborn facts” in order to face the threat coming from the ecclesial authority (SMW 3), started stripping nature of all those elements that could not be observed by measuring instruments and did not fit the picture of bits of matter wandering through an empty universe of mechanic relations. The Lockean distinction between primary and secondary qualities served well that need. While measurable qualities were considered to inhere in nature intrinsically, other aspects like color, smell, and taste had to be excluded from scientific consideration and exported onto the other fundamental (and founding) principle of modern thought, the concept of the knowing subject (Muraca 2007). As Whitehead writes, “primary qualities are the essential qualities of substances whose spatio-

<sup>10</sup> Epistemic anthropocentrism is obviously not the same as moral anthropocentrism. To say that only humans can value does not mean that only humans are morally considerable and therefore the loci of inherent moral value. Humans might consider other entities as being loci of inherent moral value by attributing it to them.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger uses the color metaphor to address this way of understanding the purportedly neutral gawping at the world. For him instead, in our daily way of interaction in and with the world, things are not first present-at-hand—i.e. just there as objects—and then are “subjectively colored” (SZ 71) as something that is added to them afterwards. Interestingly enough, Krebs uses the same metaphor to claim the opposite when she writes with reference to humans' aesthetic valuation of nonhuman beings, that eudaimonistic value “dyes” the objects with a subjective cloth of judgment (Krebs 1997, 371).

<sup>12</sup> More specifically for Locke a causal locus. Secondary qualities are the powers to produce ideas in us. As Hampe remarks, they are *dispositional* qualities, and therefore fundamentally relational (Hampe 1990).

temporal relationships constitute nature. . . . The sensations are projected by the minds so as to clothe appropriate bodies in external nature” (SMW 54). Experience had to be cast out of nature so that natural sciences could only consider “that part of nature that can possibly be an object of sense perception, leaving out the experience itself, in which the object appears” (Hampe 1990, 25; my translation). As a result, as Whitehead with bitter irony remarks, “bodies are perceived as with qualities which in reality do not belong to them, qualities which in fact are purely the offspring of the mind. Thus nature gets credits which should in truth be reserved for ourselves: the rose for its scent: the nightingale for his song: and the sun for his radiance. The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless . . .” (SMW 54). What had been excluded from “nature” thus conceived, ended up on a quite different stage, laid out by modern philosophy to the support of the new science: the representational subject. The modern subject thus fulfilled a double task for the new sciences: on the one hand it became a kind of disposal site serving the exclusion needed for the scientific explanations of nature, and on the other it constituted the foundational ground for certainty (if not truth itself) from Descartes on. “Nature” constructed as the object of the natural sciences is the result of a heroic abstraction from anything that was in the way of scientific materialism and its model of explanation.

For Whitehead, “the red glow of the sunset should be as much part of nature as the molecules and electric waves by which men of science would explain the phenomenon” (CN 29). “Nature” cannot be understood, let alone explained, if experience is excluded altogether from it, as I have mentioned in the former section.

The notion of value as a supervenient tertiary quality relies on the artificial bifurcation that separates “objective” matters of fact from “subjective” tonal modes of perception that are added to the mere observation of facts in a secondary instance and within the perceiver. This is a highly abstractive representation of human-nature relations that does not correspond to the way in which most people would probably frame their experience, which is structurally value-laden (or, better, value-oriented).

Normally, we do not first observe the objective qualities of trees and then feel the beauty of the forest (or its hazardousness, for that matter). The abstraction rooted in the bifurcation of nature cannot account for immediate experience and is not even a useful analytical tool when it comes to understand the meaning of values and the complex axiological narrative that frames human-nature relations in environmental ethics.

### 2.1.2 Radical Relationalism and values

In *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead offers a slightly different, rather phenomenological explanation of what I call radical relationalism with respect to experience and to values.

Our first mode of encountering the world is not that of an observation of details singled out and identified in their specific characteristics. Rather, the original mode of experience is what Whitehead calls “vague totality,” which has then to be vectorially oriented in order to gain *importance*, i.e. focused attention to single aspects or details:

“The whole notion of our massive experience conceived as a reaction to clearly envisaged details is fallacious. The relationship should be inverted. The details are a reaction to the totality. . . . They are interpretive and not originative. What is original is the vague totality.” (MT 109)

The primary mode of grasping reality precedes the distinction between subject and object and does not take the form of detailed observation. It is within that very vague totality of the encounter that, *on a second instance*, distinctions might be articulated, including the first, general discrimination between “The Whole,” “That Other,” and “This-My-Self” (MT 110). Likewise, the primary mode of experience is not neutral, but intrinsically value-soaked, if you allow me the metaphor that signals a vagueness that cannot be dissected in its first appearance. The original relation in which experience is possible is a value relation, not in the sense of a value judgment articulated in cognitive or logical terms, but as a field of fundamental openness and care for whatever might occur. As Whitehead writes: “Our enjoyment of actuality is a realization of worth, good or bad. It is a value experience. Its basic expression is—Have a care, here is something that matters! Yes—that is the best phrase—the primary glimmering of con-

consciousness reveals, something that matters" (MT 116).

I am reminded here of another phenomenological analysis of our most fundamental mode of encountering the world. For Heidegger the ontological mode of Being for *Dasein* is not being within the world, somewhere located in a distinctive spot from which to gawp at (*begaffen*) something merely present-at-hand (SZ 61; § 13). The staring attitude, in which knowledge is rooted, implies already a separation between a staring subject and an object which is stared at and lays somewhere before us (*vorhanden*), with which we might relate according to our inclination (SZ 57; §12). Instead, *Dasein* is more originally being-in-the-world, embedded in a *concerned* relation—I would say a value-relation—which implies already a kind of having to do with something, producing something, undertaking, accomplishing, and so on (SZ 57; §12). In other words, concern (*Besorgen*) and care (*Sorge*) are the most original ways in which *Dasein* encounters the world (*Begegnen*). To translate it into more palatable language, our most fundamental way of being is not the mode of observation, but a mode of concerned interaction, a care that does not (yet and per se) imply any ethical conduct, but simply displays involvement and emotional tonality as something that is more around us than within us.<sup>13</sup> Despite all the differences between Heidegger's and Whitehead's systems of thought that include the detailed meaning of the term "care," on this point there is an important commonality: "have a care, here is something that matters!" is the fundamental-ontological mode of inhabiting the world, the basis that renders further discrimination, focused attention, and distinction between subject and object possible in the first place.

Recapitulating, value is at first a relational *locus*, the vague field of encounter, in which subject and object are not yet clearly distinct. It is the very field in which experience is possible at all and through which further distinctions can take place.

Thus intended, value is not a cognitive process of valuation, but a pre-thematic and vague horizon of relationality. At this fundamental level, value does not have any moral meaning, but essentially expresses the fundamentally ontological-aesthetic

condition of being-in-the-world—not only for *Dasein*, i.e. for humans.

Moreover, for Whitehead value is ultimately the *intrinsic reality of an event* (SMW 95), where intrinsic does not mean solipsistic, but essentially constituted by relations combined in a creative, novel form. Value cannot stand alone, but refers to processes of realization or actualization, in which from innumerable possibilities, *some-thing* comes into existence: "At the base of our existence is the sense of 'worth.' Now worth essentially presupposes that which is worthy. Here the notion of worth is not to be construed in a purely eulogistic sense. It is the sense of existence for its own sake, of existence which is its own justification, of existence with its own character" (MT 109). Given that experience in its fundamental-ontological meaning is the mode in which internal relations flow into and are taken in by a new *Gestalt*, the emergence of a coherent form—not disrupted by the concurrence of incompatibilities—is a result of channeling, excluding, and (we could say with Whitehead) *deciding*.<sup>14</sup>

At this very first level, whatever is, results from a process of actualization that implies and realizes value. We encounter it with some kind of primordial and vague awe towards realized complexity and beauty.

Of course, at a second instance and after distinctions, values can be articulated into different expressions of approval or disapproval, be it the mode of feeling exhibited by most animals in a more or less articulated way, or in the logical form of a judgment based on language-like reasoning.

In the conduct of our lives, in our preferences, and in our consciously articulated judgments, we might or might not betray that fundamental, vague sense of care that grounds our very existence as relational beings and our most original mode of encountering the world in experience. This is a different story that is embedded in the process of codification of what matters in societies and that is also significantly influenced by institutional settings, modes of subjectivation, patterns of recognition, and other social norms.

<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Heidegger's position, see Muraca 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Whitehead is aware of the problem of using an anthropomorphic term for something occurring at the fundamental-ontological level: "The word 'decision' does not here imply conscious judgment, though in some 'decisions' consciousness will be a factor. The word is used in its root sense of a 'cutting off'" (PR 43).

## 2.2 Relational Axiology: From instrumental to relational values

In the axiological debate within environmental ethics, the paramount distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values guides most of the different theoretical positions. While a lot has been written about how to understand the category of intrinsic values, which exhibits an ambiguity between the rather deontological meaning of inherent moral value and the more general connotation of something that is valued for its intrinsic properties or for its own sake, instrumental values do not seem to be a matter of dispute. In this section I will briefly reconstruct the dichotomy and its flaws, and then dedicate some attention to the neglected category of instrumental values that point toward a more general perspective on non-intrinsic, relational values.<sup>15</sup> In a third step, I will develop the concept of relational values on a Whiteheadian footing.

### 2.2.1 Intrinsic and inherent moral values

In a key contribution to environmental ethics, John O'Neill offers a detailed classification of the complex meaning of intrinsic value. He offers three definitions: non-instrumental value (i.e. referring to ends in themselves and not to means to other ends), non-relational value (i.e. the value that something has in virtue of its nonrelational properties), and objective value (independent from the valuation of valuers) (O'Neill 2008, 131). O'Neill shows that in most environmental ethics contributions these three different definitions have been conflated. I would like to add that one of the main problems in the traditional debate on values in environmental ethics is the conflation between axiology and deontology in one and the same step: scholars often use the term intrinsic value to discuss the moral standing of non-human entities on the ground of their being (or not) members of the moral community. The famous classification offered by Frankena of different positions in environmental ethics refers to the type of entities that are considered as holding value in themselves *and therefore* as being members of the moral community (Frankena 1979), whether this refers to humans only (moral anthropocentrism), or to sentient beings (sentientism or pathocentrism), or to all living entities (biocentrism), and so on. In this use, intrinsic value means at the same time non-

instrumental, because it refers to ends in themselves, and relates to the intrinsic, non-relational properties of the beings considered for their own sake. The reason for this conflation goes back to the Kantian framework of the means-ends relations, on which more or less explicitly the debate about moral consideration relies. Accordingly, full members of the moral community deserve *direct* moral respect, while entities outside it deserve moral consideration only *indirectly* with respect to their meaning and functionality for the members (Muraca 2011).

For Kant, only beings that are ends in themselves are members of the moral community. The ground for this does not rely on any intrinsic property of the beings in question, but depends on the necessary postulate that we are free beings and therefore moral agents. This is a very strong claim that displays a deontological immediacy based on what we could term a *transcendental-pragmatic* argument that bypasses any reference to specific properties for grounding the moral standing of rational beings.<sup>16</sup> As Kant states in a pivotal footnote in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, freedom is the *ratio essendi* of morality, while morality is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom: whenever we act morally and expect others to do so, we necessarily (and implicitly) assume that they are free, and therefore ends-in-themselves. Otherwise morality would not make any sense at all. As I have claimed elsewhere, the “practical” (i.e. moral) recognition of others as (potentially) morally acting beings already implies a direct moral duty towards them qua ends-in-themselves. Kant call this immediate, pragmatic implication a *Postulate of Practical Reason* (Muraca 2011, 377).

In this framework beings do not so much *hold* intrinsic value, but *are* values-in-themselves with immediate deontological implications. A more appropriate phrasing of this axiological category would be “inherent moral value,” as it is independent from intrinsic properties and rooted in deontological moral theory. Within the Kantian dichotomic perspective, what is not an end in itself is a means to another end. This implies that besides inherent moral values there are only instrumental values. This is to say,

<sup>15</sup> Of course, as was argued earlier, for Whitehead even intrinsic values are at least rooted in relations.

<sup>16</sup> Pragmatic here refers not to pragmatism, of course, but to praxis and practices. In our very praxis we constantly enact the transcendental co-implication between morality and freedom. We could not possibly think of ourselves or live in a human community without this factual and enacted presupposition.

entities that are not ends-in-themselves are valuable insofar as they are related to ends-in-themselves as instruments or means for them. Thus we have direct moral obligations *towards* ends-in-themselves *in regard* (*in Ansehung*) to what serves them as a means (Muraca 2011).

I am not sure that all environmental ethics scholars who position themselves according to the standard classification and claim for specific beings the status of members of the moral community intend this claim in the same sense as the Kantian framework.<sup>17</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, extending the Kantian framework in its immediate articulation to include other nonhuman beings is theoretically problematic, and might have deleterious effects on the strength of argument itself (*ibidem*). Without getting into the details of this discussion, I want to point out here that whether the notion of intrinsic value is outlined in Kantian terms or not, the dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental values is reproduced in most environmental ethics positions.

The second meaning of intrinsic value (non-relational) is even more problematic. Accordingly, something holds intrinsic value on the ground of its intrinsic properties. O'Neill distinguishes here between a strong and a weak version of this meaning: in the strong version intrinsic properties can be characterized without reference to other objects, whereas in the weak sense they persist regardless of the existence of other objects (O'Neill 2008, 134). In both cases it is not clear what is actually meant: is something valuable only if its properties are not related to something else? Especially when talking about ecological processes and living organisms, this seems a rather contradictory statement. In fact, if anything, it is precisely the interrelatedness of beings that makes them invaluable—no pun intended. O'Neill mentions “rarity” or even “being untouched by humans” as example of values that are *per definition* not intrinsic, as they can only be grasped with reference to something or someone else. Of course, from a Whiteheadian point of view, a non-relational property is sheer nonsense, as I have argued in the former section. Properties or qualities are expressions of internal relations: something is what and how it is due to the relations that constitute it and have been included into it.

In most cases, when scholars refer to intrinsic values, they actually mean that something is valued intrinsically, i.e. for being as it is regardless of its *usefulness* or *utility* for others, mainly humans. Again, this has less to do with some intrinsic properties than with a non-instrumental relation. According to Taylor:

“Any such entity is intrinsically valued insofar as some person cherishes it, holds it dear or precious, loves, admires, or appreciates it for what it is in itself, or so places intrinsic value on its existence. This value is independent of whatever instrumental or commercial value it might have. When something is intrinsically valued by someone, it is deemed by that person to be worthy of being preserved and protected because it is the particular thing that it is.” (Taylor quoted by Hargrove 2008, 178)

This kind of valuation is obviously based on a consideration that is not instrumental, but is it also non-relational? Hargrove remarks that “when an aesthetic intrinsic value judgment is converted into instrumental terms, the person having the aesthetic experience is depicted as using natural scenery as a trigger for feelings of pleasure” (Hargrove 2008, 183). However, for Hargrove, framing aesthetic valuation in instrumental terms misrepresents the profound meaning of aesthetic experience altogether. This is the case precisely because, if anything, aesthetic experience is utterly relational both in the fundamental sense of a phenomenological grasping of vague beauty and in a more immediate, mundane way of expressing human-nature relations in terms of specific aesthetic criteria.

Recapitulating this first part, both inherent moral value and intrinsic value are constructed as opposite from instrumental value for different reasons: the first term indicates the fundamental distinction between means and ends-in-themselves, while the second one claims a different form of relation that is not reducible to an instrumental framework. It would therefore be more appropriate to consider intrinsic value in the second meaning as a specific mode of relation, or, as I will show later, as a type of relational value. The term “intrinsic” here is misleading.

Before moving to the next section, which reconstructs in Whiteheadian terms the concept of instrumental values and the distinction between means and

<sup>17</sup> With some notable exceptions, such as Regan's argument for animal rights (Regan 1983).



ends, let me briefly add a comment on the category of inherent moral value from a Whiteheadian perspective.

If inherent moral values refer to ends-in-themselves in the Kantian sense, i.e. beings that set their own ends and act teleologically, Whitehead's philosophy extends teleology to the fundamental-ontological level of the actualization or self-realization of occasions of experience as *loci* of value. As I have shown elsewhere, this becomes “visible” at least at the level of living organisms that act to a certain extent teleologically (Muraca 2014).<sup>18</sup> In this very sense, from a Whiteheadian point of view, all actual entities (and in a more substantial way living organisms) *are* intrinsic values because they result from of a process of self-realization rooted in valuations. However, this fundamental meaning does not have any immediate deontological implications. Rather, it refers to an ontological-aesthetic ground for moral respect based in what Ferré has called a *kalogenic* process (Ferré 1996): each actualization realizes beauty and deserves some kind of respect and attention that does not mean necessarily a direct moral obligation in Kantian terms.

### 2.2.2 Instrumental values as a reductionist understanding of relations

The value dichotomy based on the Kantian framework has made its way beyond the scholarly debate of environmental ethics into key documents developing the general frame for policy making, institutional action, and research agendas, such as the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* (MEA). The MEA clearly refers to Kant in the chapter on value, where it states that “the counter-utilitarian idea that there is a difference between preferences and values and that considerations of individual rights temper calculations of aggregate utility was most clearly and powerfully expressed by Kant, who wrote, ‘Everything has either a price or a dignity. Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity. But that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself does not have mere relative worth, i.e., a price, but

an intrinsic worth, i.e., a dignity’ (Kant 1959 [1785]: 53, italics in original)” (MEA 2003, 142-143). The framework chosen replicates a poor, dichotomic axiology that only knows a distinction between either instrumental values, which are in principle replaceable, compensable, and (in the extreme) can be price-tagged, or inherent moral values, which have intrinsic worth in the sense of dignity.

Unfortunately, the MEA itself is not clear about how to relate these two perspectives in a coherent value system. In the chapter on value and valuation, the two perspectives are simply juxtaposed without a satisfactory synthesis. While in the first part of the chapter economic valuation defined as *Total Economic Value* (encompassing use-values and non-use-values) is defended, the second part addresses other sets of value, such as identity-constituting values and inherent values without relating them to the first set. Documents like the MEA are the outcome of a complex process of negotiation among different perspectives, disciplines, and social actors. It displays—so to say—the scars of the negotiation, and reproduces open tensions.

By accepting such a dichotomy, we are faced on the one hand with the difficulties of attributing dignity to nonhuman entities and processes in a solipsistic way, and on the other with the implication that all beings which cannot be plausibly considered as holding “dignity,” are left to a merely instrumental valuation, and are therefore open to quantification, commodification, and replacement.<sup>19</sup> Such a dichotomy is not only theoretically poor, but also pragmatically inappropriate for environmental policies, as it fully misrepresents the intuitions that most people have about their relation to non-human nature and the reasons for preserving it. Oftentimes what counts for them is not so much “nature” in and for itself, but the complex and intertwined relational texture that human-nonhuman interactions can create in the particular context of their lives (Chan et al. 2016).

Moreover, the dichotomic framework adopted by the MEA is rooted in the Western paradigm of a bifurcated nature and made into a term of reference for the conservation of ecosystems worldwide. In the last section I will show how this very framework

<sup>18</sup> With reference to Fox-Keller, I distinguish between agency and intentionality, and claim that for living beings at least agency (*Zwecktätigkeit*) has to be assumed in order to properly understand them.

<sup>19</sup> Money, as we know, is a universal equivalent. Whatever can be in principle price-tagged or commodified is also replaceable by something else with the same monetary value. For a critique of the commodification of ecosystem services, see inter alia Kosoy/Corbera 2010.

embodies an imperialistic model of environmentalism imposed on countries of the Global South, both in terms of the instrumental valuation of ecosystem services and their commodification, and in the name of the idea of “nature” as separated from society, to be valued and preserved for its own sake without human use. I claim that a perspective based on Whitehead’s radical relationalism can offer an alternative approach.

The problem with the dichotomic framework is not only that all human-nature relations are reduced to merely instrumental ones, but also that the very understanding of instrumental relations is rooted in a misrepresentation of the self-world relation based on the bifurcation of nature. Let me briefly elaborate on this second aspect. The concept of “instrumental value” refers to a means-ends type of relation. Accordingly, instruments are (mostly passive) means chosen to satisfy one’s own ends. The tacit assumption in this mode of relation is that a subject S employs a means M to accomplish an end E, where S is independent and precedes M (both logically and ontologically), and can in principle dispose of different possible ‘Ms’ to reach E. M’s value is commensurate to the reaching of the goal, which implies that any other means available are as good as the original one.

However, as Kant has already shown, the relation means-ends can be perfectly explained in terms of efficient causation, with the only difference that for reasons of relevance we focus on the effect rather than on the cause. In fact, if we didn’t presuppose ends-in-themselves—i.e. for Kant humans AS free and independent moral agents that conclude the cause-effect chain—then the very language of means would not make sense at all. Properly speaking, means are only such to subjects, who are not influenced by them, but precede the means and employ them as instruments for their own goals. Otherwise, means can be termed the *most proximate cause* (*nächste Ursache*): “in the series of mutually subordinated links in a connection of purposes, each intermediate link must be regarded as a purpose (though, by the same token, not as a final purpose) and its proximate cause is the means to it” (Kant CJ, §63).

This understanding of instrumentality is rooted in the assumption of the subject as something separated, independent, and preceding any relations,

including instrumental ones. While in many situations this is a pragmatic way of framing our relation to the world, it is in general the outcome of the heroic abstraction based on the bifurcation of nature that does not consider the subject, or self, as embedded in a flow of constitutive relations. By taking seriously Kant’s consideration in a Whiteheadian scheme, we have to consider means primarily as causes that somehow affect internally the very subject that employs them. Once we question the idea of a “perfect” subject, which comes before action and is not determined by it, the means-ends-relation takes a different shape. Likewise, if we accept that subjects and selves are in-the-making, what we call means also have an efficacious effect upon the very subject who has employed them as means (Muraca 2010).

The continuity of personal identity is not guaranteed by an enduring subject, whether it be an enduring substance like the Cartesian *res cogitans*, or a transcendental function which allows for the unity of all experiences by preceding them logically without being determined by them, as with Kant.<sup>20</sup> A subject for Whitehead is not a pre-existing substrate, but a constant process of becoming. It is a privileged “route” of occasions of experience, of subject-occasions that bear a strong relevance in the narrative-historical path of a person’s biography. At each step what we do affects who/what we are or will be in the next process of actualization and self-realization that constitutes our life (hi)story (Muraca 2005).

Relations, bounds, and causal influences are the creativity vectors that support and carry on the process of a becoming self as a series of momentary occasions of experience.<sup>21</sup> Without the privileged relevance of the past and the continuous anticipation of future possibilities, the self would spread and lose any cohesion. In this sense, human beings are characterized by their being open projects against a background of complex givenness—to frame it in Heideggerian language, their essence is their ex-

<sup>20</sup> As Catherine Keller very clearly points out: “A person is not a single, enduring subject that underlies the flux of its experience. A person is more like a series of momentary experiences connected by the transition he (James) calls ‘conjunctive relations’” (Keller 1986, 178).

<sup>21</sup> Also, the anticipation of the future is a determining factor for this continuity (AI 197) and is intimately constitutive of every process of actualization. It acts in the form of a “lure,” and delivers a certain provisional continuity to the process of realization itself.

istence in the form of a decision that overcomes reality towards possibility at each step of their becoming.

From a Whiteheadian point of view, the subject is the activity of self-creation and coincides with the aim of the process of actualization itself. Whitehead calls it a *subject-superject* because it is projected to the completion of an actualization process and *lures*, i.e. attracts it to its own realization. In a process of actualization, the subject S is at the same time the driving force and the result of the process, it is not before the process and can only come into being through it and its conditions. According to this model, S is not only affected by, but also partly determined by the means that it employs for the achievement of its goals.

In other words, employing an instrument as a means ALREADY acts upon the one who is using it. This is something that we can experience every time we use a tool: by using it we enter a complex relation with it and become *another*. We are changed in a way that is not completely under our control (Latour 2002). In most cases this complexity can be neglected and the tool “simply” employed. However, there are situations in which we are reminded that tools are never mere means, but also factors that determine who we are and what we do. It is a matter of relevance and of attention, whether a means has to be considered as a cause on which we are dependent. The instrumental perspective can be thus conceived as the result of a selective view: whenever the causal efficacy of means can be reasonably neglected or is irrelevant, it is appropriate to speak in terms of “mere means.”

The relations to means and instruments does not only affect individuals, but also the peculiar mode of existence of societies. The way in which a society frames its material, social, and cultural relations to “nature” is constitutive of its very self-understanding and structure. Especially in advanced industrialized society, technology can no longer be considered as a set of tools to be employed as instruments according to an aim-setting external to it. Tools are not only independent from ends, but shape and determine the ends—and, as we know, the subjects employing them. Accordingly, using and interacting with tools modifies us and the way we (collectively) think, behave, and act (Ellul 1989). From an anthropological point of view, technology is a form of relation to the world and to others; it embodies and shapes so-

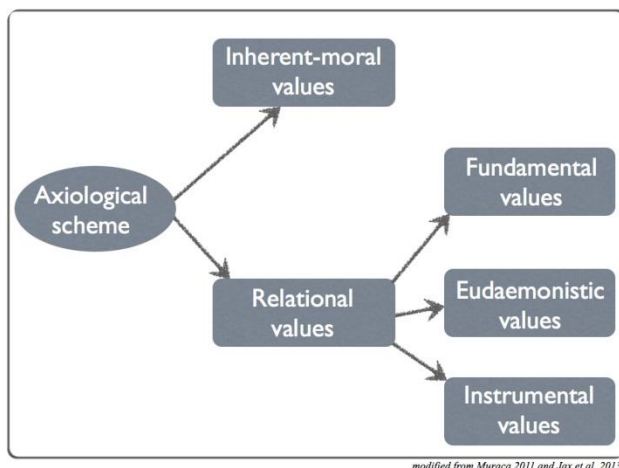
cial relationships. Tools are carriers of meaning, reflect power relations, and enframe the sphere of actions and collective practices. The kind of tools a society chooses to employ and develop determines its political, institutional, and ethical fabric.

Moving back to our discussion on instrumental values, we can hold that a) instrumental relations to “nature” are a specific subcategory of more complex modes of relations, and b) only a few of these modes can be adequately and appropriately framed as merely instrumental when the abstraction from the complexity of causal interdependence can be reasonably justified. We could add to that a further consideration c) that neglecting the constituting character of what we call instrumental relations can be a misleading illusion with detrimental consequences. First, it reinforces the deception of a self-contained subject who relates to a world of objects and means at his disposal while neglecting his ontological and existential dependence on those very “means.” Second, it reproduces what Whitehead called the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*, i.e. an unjustified switching between abstraction and actuality, in which the process of abstraction is forgotten and what is merely a restricted perspective is taken to mean the whole. Depending on the actual relevance of what has been excluded by the process of abstraction, this can have severe repercussions.

### 2.2.3 From instrumental to relational values

A different axiological categorization is needed to adequately represent human-nature relations without replicating the bifurcation of nature. In my previous work I have outlined an alternative axiological matrix for environmental ethics (Muraca 2011). This perspective has been further developed in recent interdisciplinary debates about the valuation of ecosystem services (Jax et. al. 2013). Following from that, I suggest we abandon the classic axiological classification of environmental ethics and adopt the category of “relational values” as a more appropriate way of articulating how and why we value what we call “nature.”

In this scheme inherent moral values are kept as a distinct category, although from a Whiteheadian perspective, this does not mean that they are not relational in principle. The reason for having a separate category for inherent moral values is the need to focus on the self-creative, teleological process that



leads to novelty, intensity, and complexity. This category can be framed in a direct moral sense based on Kantian deontology or in an aesthetic/ethical way on the ground of Ferrés *kalogenesis*.

Relational values, on the other hand, encompass different modes of relations and correspond to different languages of valuation and practices. We can at least distinguish between three modes of relational values: fundamental, eudaemonistic, and instrumental.

Fundamental and eudaemonistic values are intrinsic in the sense that the relations that ground them are intrinsically valuable. Following O'Neill, intrinsic here does not mean non-relational, but refers to a) a mode of relation that does not allow for substitution of one of the relata, and, more properly, b) to a relational field that enables the relata to exist and flourish in the first place. The relation itself is constitutive for the relata, as I have illustrated in the former sections of this paper.

Fundamental values refer to the ontological-fundamental system of relations that grounds the very possibility of a subject to occurring in the first place and establishing specific, even instrumental relations to the world it inhabits (Muraca 2011). They refer to relationality both at the ontological level (as the very condition for the *ex-istence* of forms and as the fundamental interdependence of the universe) and at the level of the vague, aesthetic encounter with the world as something that matters. In a more profane sense, this category can also include all processes, networks, and relational structures that constitute the fundamental conditions for our planet to maintain its complex and dynamic balance, thus supporting human and nonhuman life. It is hardly possible to specify fundamental-

relational values with respect to single entities, because this mode of relation refers to complex, all-embracing processes and their conditions of regeneration. In the MEA, the category of so-called supporting services is meant to address these specific functions of ecosystems. Looking at the graphic representation of the different types of ecosystem services in the MEA, supporting services are placed at a different level as the all-sustaining ground for other services. In a proper way, it seems rather difficult to group under the term “ecosystems”—a necessarily plural concept<sup>22</sup>—the invaluable function of, for example, photosynthesis. The atomistic framework of modern science runs against its limit when it comes to address systemic complexes and processes that unfold over time and cannot be sliced into single entities or components. Similarly, the creative “(re)productivity” of life cannot be explained in terms of single ecosystems or processes.<sup>23</sup> Fundamental values refer to collectives, processes, and wholes that cannot be reduced to singularities with clearly identifiable boundaries in time and space. Species, for example, cannot be reduced either to historical individuals or to mere logical sets (Mayr 1987). From a Whiteheadian point of view, species are relational, efficacious patterns that embody specific forms of organization and are actualized in and by organisms. Species are the fundamental conditions for their existence, and yet do not exist other than in those very actualizations (Muraca 2010).

Finally, fundamental values refer to the basic conditions for the self-understanding of a community that embodies them in collective practices, rituals, patterns of social relations, and symbolic meaning. Patterns of social, material, and cultural relations

<sup>22</sup> Unless we follow the unsteady path of considering planet Earth as “one” ecosystem, which seems rather indefensible.

<sup>23</sup> I borrow here the term (re)productivity from the feminist scholars Adelheid Biesecker and Sabine Hofmeister, who introduced it to challenge the capitalistic-patriarchal distinction between productivity, which refers to what is considered as an economic process, and reproductivity, which is supposed to refer to what is not productive, such as care activities and nature's processes of regeneration. By writing (re)productivity this way, they challenge this dichotomy and claim that so-called reproductive processes are creative, indeed productive, and the most fundamental conditions for any other form of what we might call production. The (re)productivity of life is a perfect example for a fundamental-relational value (Biesecker/Hofmeister 2010).

also determine the specific understanding of the relation to “nature” that characterizes the collective and how this is implemented in practices, institutions, and policies.

The idea of fundamental dependency connected with the idea of human finitude, as it is stated in most spiritual traditions, reveals this vague intuition of fundamental relationality. For example, the connection to the “Land” (especially as it is expressed by many indigenous people) is not a “functional” link to a single entity, which is valued for its supporting services by those who benefit from them. Rather, it represents the overall relational system that constitutes individuals and encompasses their ecological, cultural, and social interdependence (Muraca, forthcoming).

Fundamental values might or might not be acknowledged and articulated in specific languages of valuation. In fact, most of the time they are not even seen, precisely because of their fundamental character. The air we breathe is so essential that we do not even start to value it until it is contaminated. So are the fundamental relations that make us who and what we are, including all the care relations, most of them not even clearly traceable, that constitute(d) our own story and personal identity. This of course does not mean that they are “objective.” As already discussed, their “locus” is the relation itself, which can or cannot be acknowledged, voiced or articulated.

Similarly, eudaemonistic values do not only refer to romantic leisure and aesthetic experiences, but encompass all those relations and processes considered as necessary for living a “good life” as a collective project. They do not articulate merely individual preferences, but include the self-understanding of a community, its social imaginary and the very basis for the common life. Eudaemonistic values can be termed intrinsic—as some scholars choose to do (Hargrove 2008)—in the sense that they cannot simply be reduced to a merely instrumental consideration because they are not substitutable in principle, at least from the point of view of the valuers. They are not valued for delivering a service or as means to reach a goal that goes beyond them. Even if one might say that experiences, processes, or entities which have eudaemonistic value convey pleasure or support a good life, and thus are not valuable in themselves, but for what they deliver, this does not correspond to the experience that most people

have. If I value a particular knife because it belonged to my father, I do not value it instrumentally for it reminding me of my father. I would not accept to replacing it with another knife (that could deliver the same or a better service in cutting things), nor another object that belonged to my father that could remind me of him. This is because it embodies complex, *concrete* relations,<sup>24</sup> displayed across space and time, inscribed in its very material structure: the signs of use on the grip, that little scratch from when it fell down at my sister's birthday party, and so on. The knife is neither a tool nor a medium to something else. It IS the relation. It embodies it almost literally. It is—to say this with Heidegger—the relational knot of the *Geviert*, the Fourfold, the intersection point of heaven and earth, the mortals and the immortals (Heidegger 1971), or, in other words: the stuff it is made of that is not simply bare matter, but the outcome of a continuous activity of re-enacting its form and shape; the meanings and records it bears as a condensation of stories and abstract possibilities; the hands that touched it; its history extending over time into the past and the future (anyway this is one way of interpreting the fourfold—others are possible). Nothing can replace it, and even if I were forced to sell it for money, the relation embodied in it would not be represented in the price. It would be reduced to something that it is not, cut off from the relational field that holds it. Indeed, we would not accept a feasible substitute for what we value *intrinsically* in this very sense of the term. Ordinary language confirms this: when we say that something is priceless, we mean precisely that there is no equivalent by which it could be replaced (money is the universal equivalent), and therefore measured or compensated.

This is of course even more dramatic when it comes to collective meanings and relational fields that sustain and support the life—the good life—of a whole community. The idea of human embeddedness, as it is stated in many non-Western traditions, reveals this vague intuition of fundamental and eudaemonistic relationality.

Especially in the Western understanding of human-nature relations, fundamental and eudaemonistic values are framed in terms of instrumental values

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<sup>24</sup> And not just an abstract means-ends link between knives and cutting. It is concrete because it is the outcome of the growing together of several actualizations. This knife is like no other one.

precisely because our constituting relations are denied or ignored. This might be perfectly appropriate when the relevance of what is ignored is not very strong. For most knives I interact with every day, this whole complexity can be neglected. However, relevance is not something given in absolute terms, but in a contested field in which the asymmetry of power plays a significant and sometimes deleterious role.

As I will mention in the last section, moreover, forcing fundamental-relational or eudaemonistic values into an instrumental language performatively affects material, social, and cultural relations to “nature.” This imposition is in place whenever languages of valuation based on fundamental or eudaemonistic values do not have a voice and are repressed or replaced by the hegemonic language of the dominant paradigm(s), as is the case, for example, with the valuation models based on mainstream economics and market-driven perspectives.

### **3. From environmental ethics to global environmental justice: Questioning the Western model(s) of environmentalism with Whitehead**

One of the consequences of the bifurcation of nature is that our very living body had to be defined as external “qua” natural and turned for us into external nature rather than being ‘the’ nature that we ultimately are to ourselves (Böhme 1989, 32). As Böhme writes, what has been constructed as “external nature”—the other of reason and culture—could easily be kept at a distance as an object of scientific observation, use, and exploitation. As a reaction to this objectifying and instrumentalizing view of “nature” based on modern science, a new aesthetic of “nature” developed in the wake of the Romantic movement in Europe and in the US. Kant’s concept of the sublime, as well as Wordsworth’s poetry and the transcendentalist movement inspired by Emerson and Thoreau, contributed to what Böhme calls “the Romantic invention of nature.” This is the time of landscape paintings and of the discovery of hiking<sup>25</sup> as a recreational activity away from civilization and urban settings. “Nature” is framed as the other of reason, as the naive, unreflected, wild, primitive, non-civilized, innocent other that can be observed,

contemplated, and enjoyed at a distance from the point of view of those who are not engaged in a working relation to and with it.

According to Böhme, this corresponds to the aesthetics of the bourgeois intellectual who encounters nature in her leisure time; he calls it a “bourgeois aesthetics of nature.” As he further observes, such an aesthetic relation to Romantic “nature” does not mark a real opposition to modern natural science and the attitude of exploitation of natural resources. Rather, externalization and instrumentalization of nature and the aesthetic relation of contemplation and wonder are two sides of the same coin. Both stem from the bifurcation and frame “nature” as the separate other.

While Whitehead is inspired by Wordsworth in his critique of the modern bifurcation, his philosophy of organism does not simply fall in the easy trap of the Romantic bourgeois aesthetics. In fact, by challenging the bifurcation, Whitehead does not simply reproduce the opposition on a different footing. The Romantic subject—eminently represented in Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings as the observer at a distance of the sublime scenery displayed by natural landscapes—does not escape the Whiteheadian critique. Whitehead’s radical relationalism questions its very steady foundation and re-opens the frame in which human-nature relations are depicted.

In the next section, I want to elaborate on this point in order to show how a Whiteheadian radical relationalism can offer an alternative path to two hegemonic currents of Western environmentalism that have emerged and proliferated all over the world along a rather imperialistic path. To borrow a classification that the political ecologist Martinez-Alier suggests, we can call them the Cult of Wilderness and the Gospel of Ecoefficiency (Martinez-Alier 2002).

#### ***3.1 Western Environmentalism***

The cult of wilderness is rooted in the idea of “nature” as something separated, distinct, and independent from humans. By definition, wilderness is an untouched area in which humans are only visitors who do not remain, as the Wilderness Act says. Manipulation and management, albeit necessary to keep wilderness areas wild, have to be hidden and kept invisible to the spectator or the visitor. The cult of wilderness is constructed around the idea of pristine nature, a condition that corresponds to specific ex-

<sup>25</sup> The English Thesaurus explains the term “hiking” inter alia as “walking for recreation.” The very idea of hiking was alien to the people before the Romantic movement. Walking in general was rather associated with poverty.

pectations and narratives of a place without humans, wherein the humans meant in this narrative are the European settlers. First Nation people were considered as part of the wild. The “pristine” condition that the cult of wilderness strives to recreate is thus the status of ecosystems of pre-Columbian America, from which the original inhabitants had been literally annihilated (Callicott and Nelson 1998). This story, however, does not just belong to the past. This idea of wilderness still plays a major role in the activity of several NGOs all over the world. Contemporary nature conservation paradigms centered in this Western tradition advocate the necessity of preserving wilderness areas that exclude human use and exploitation. As Ramachandra Guha has shown, this form of environmentalism is ultimately rooted in a consumeristic attitude towards “nature” elsewhere, defined as wilderness and as “untouched” by humans. In the name of this paradigm, locals, peasants, and indigenous people—those who have indeed a “working” relation to “nature”—have been evicted from their land or forced into a scheme that heavily jeopardizes their livelihoods (Guha 2000). A poisonous alliance has formed between environmental organizations based in the Global North and the upper classes of countries of the Global South (like India), an alliance interested in preserving “nature” for its own pleasure. In this framework the value of “nature” is constructed along the same lines as the wilderness conservation narrative that is so powerful in the Global North. It is the necessary other to society, a place that contrasts with the urban rhythms of life and is essential for the regeneration and spiritual integrity of busy business people. Guha is very clear in pointing out that ultimately such an approach to “nature” and wilderness as something to be protected and preserved for its own sake independently of human transformation reproduces implicitly an instrumental consideration. Wilderness is a necessary component of the self-understanding of modern societies, something that can be consumed in the form of contemplation, inspiration, and research. This materializes in tourism, documentary films, exclusive journeys, photographs, different forms of active engagement that often lead to the exclusion of those people who do not share this conception of “nature” as the other, but are used to inhabiting, transforming, interacting with, and sharing a territory with other inhabitants, both human and non-human: “tribal people in the Madagascar or Amazon

forest are expected to move out only so that residents of London or New York can have the comfort of knowing that the lemur or toucan has been saved for posterity—evidence of which is then provided for them by way of the wildlife documentary they can watch on their television screens” (Guha 2000, 369). Wilderness areas are preserved for the pleasure of the new upper and middle classes in the Global South and for the joy of Western nature lovers. The bourgeois aesthetic of nature embodies not only a racist, but also a classist form of discrimination and oppression: Romantic ‘nature’ is encountered in a recreational mood freed from material or cultural necessities and dependencies. Guha’s brilliant provocation bears an important lesson from a Whiteheadian perspective: the language of intrinsic value is not the opposite of instrumental language, but shares a kinship relationship with it. Both are rooted in the concept of a bifurcated nature and the myth of an independent, separate subject, and in the neglect of the fundamental relationality that constitutes it.

The Gospel of eco-efficiency is based on a clearly instrumental consideration of “nature” in terms of capital, resources, and sinks that have to be efficiently managed in order to guarantee the continuous reproduction of the established model of Western development in the long run. This is currently the worldwide hegemonic paradigm when environmental issues are addressed. Inspired by a rather narrow understanding of sustainable development in terms of sustained economic growth, it has more recently been reformulated during the Rio+20 summit in 2012 as a path to the Green Economy. According to the different approaches that embody the gospel of eco-efficiency,<sup>26</sup> technological and institutional innovation combined with some forms of regulation are the key drivers for a successful path towards sustainable development. Through an *efficient* and/or *consistent* management of resources,<sup>27</sup> biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, and climate

<sup>26</sup> Not only the green economy, but also other approaches such as ecological modernization populate the heterogeneous and multifaceted universe of the gospel of eco-efficiency. For the sake of brevity, I will not address them here in detail.

<sup>27</sup> Efficiency refers only to the relation between means and ends, while consistency is a criterion that considers the qualitative modes of regeneration of natural processes and frames economic development in accordance with them.

change can be at least slowed down. The current, controversial debate about ecosystem services and their monetization is part of this approach. While the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment—as we have seen—did not reduce the assessment of ecosystem to a merely economic valuation, more recent documents, such as TEEB (*The Economics of Ecosystem and Biodiversity*), tend to focus almost exclusively on economic language (Kumar 2012). Interestingly enough, however, within TEEB itself different economic schools have argued about the scope and the dangers attached to market instruments, commodification, and monetization of ecosystem services. Scholars from so-called heterodox economic traditions have stressed the importance of not reducing the heterogeneity of languages of valuation to a merely instrumental frame (Martinez-Alier 2009) and question the feasibility and appropriateness of monetization (Vatn 2005; O'Connor and Frame 2011).

In so doing, they invoke the incommensurability of languages of valuation that express human-nature relations and the cultural, social, and ecological complexity of processes that cannot be sliced into single units. In their critique of the instrumentalization language used to address ecosystem services, these scholars neither appeal to the narrative of wilderness nor to the intrinsic value of “nature” that cannot be price-tagged. Instead of reproducing the dualism between price and dignity articulated in the MEA, they clearly advocate a different way of framing relations and processes. The very term “nature” loses its grip as the objective of environmental policies and actions.

Such a perspective voices an alternative current of environmentalism that challenges both the cult of wilderness and the gospel of eco-efficiency and radically questions the Western dominant language of environmentalism altogether. As we have shown, both traditions share a common root in the concept of a bifurcated nature and of an independent and separate subject facing it.

### 3.2 *Environmentalism of the Poor*

Martinez-Alier and Guha call this third current that is at work in many parts of the world, but more specifically in the Global South, *environmentalism of livelihoods* or *environmentalism of the poor* (Guha & Martinez-Alier 1997). Accordingly, environmentalist movements in the Global South are

mostly led by an immediate struggle for their collective livelihoods rather than—as it is in the Global North—for ecological reasons (Martinez-Alier 2002). From the point of view of the environmentalism of livelihoods, what is at stake is not very much “nature,” but the creative processes and cycles that sustain life in general and secure its reproduction for the community inhabiting the land and interacting with it. In the name of both Western currents of environmentalism, local people who have lived for centuries in a reciprocal and complex relation with their territory—where forests, mountains, and waters have ever been the livelihood and the basis for the social imaginary of their communities—all of a sudden are kicked out of their ancestral places to make room for nature conservation areas, in which no use or human interaction is allowed, or forced to give way to large so-called development projects, such as the Special Economic Zones in India. As the Indian sociologist Nivedita Menon pointedly remarks, in India “Environment trumps People, Development trumps Environment (<http://himalmag.com/judging-judiciary/#sthash.RVJ47NSa.dpuf>).

The environmentalism of the poor refers to the daily struggles of indigenous people, small farmers, and women from the so-called Global South not only against eviction, but also and more specifically for preserving the conditions of their common life, which includes material and cultural-symbolic dimensions. They resist in order to protect what anthropologist Arturo Escobar calls a *proyecto de vida* (Escobar 2008), their collective vision for a self-determined and sustainable life in the community. The *Land*—not so much “nature”—is the space that sustains the life project of the community and requires shared, social control of the modes of appropriation of, use of, and relation to natural processes as the basis for food security, self-subsistence, and autonomy. The term “nature” makes no sense for them, as it does not express the complex frame of relations that support their lives and in which they are embedded. If anything, value is not attached to single entities, but to processes and relations. The different languages and narratives in which these relational frames are articulated refer to the land, the place, or the territory, inhabited by different beings (what we would call human and nonhuman, natural and supernatural) that are classified according to different geographies and relational schemes. This framework challenges the Western idea of “nature”



as something external to society to be—depending on the dominant paradigm—preserved (nature & wilderness conservation), exploited (eco-efficiency, green economy, weak sustainability), or managed (strong sustainability, wise use). It shifts attention to a radically different understanding of the relation to the “territory,” with all its inhabitants included in what can be best called a *cosmo-anthropo-vision*, in which interconnection among different levels of the real (biophysical, human, and supernatural) leads to specific society-nature relations and nature-culture regimes.

Such a view lays the ground for what Escobar provocatively calls a *decolonial view on nature* that “calls for seeing the interrelatedness of ecological, economic, and cultural processes that come to produce what humans call nature” (Escobar 2008, 154). Accordingly, the Western, modern concept of “nature” has delivered the monolithic world of objective relations and the never-changing background for different cultural expressions: vis-à-vis a unifying nature, the multiplicity of cultures could find its common ground as “nature,” delivered as a no-longer-questionable horizon of truth beyond all cultural differences (Descola 2011). Western ontology has imposed a colonial “nature” as the framework for reading other ways of understanding “human-nature relationships” whenever the premise was taken for granted that what is being articulated in the ontologies of nonmodern people is equivalent to our nature, and therefore reproduces a dualistic cosmology. As Descola writes: “Rather than viewing the cosmologies of non-modern peoples as false beliefs and anthropocentric projections, geared more or less convincingly to chunks of positive knowledge, it is preferable to treat them, like all our actions in the world, as a way of patterning our relations with all kinds of entities in which we discern specific qualities, entities that require in return forms of behaviour and mediation that are adequate to the nature we ascribe to them” (Descola 2011, 18). Non-Western people develop different ontologies to reflexively frame the fundamental system of relation that is the world in which they dwell (Muraca, forthcoming).

Are there any similarities in the modes of human-nature relation we can refer to within the Western tradition? Can we start reconsidering the modern ontology of nature as one ontology among others and possibly challenge and shift it in more promis-

ing patterns that can guide alternative environmental practices?

Böhme's analysis offers a feasible alternative path to the bourgeois aesthetic of nature: the model of an *ecological aesthetics of nature* that is rooted in the living body (*Leib*) as the primary mode of our being-in-the-world as *Befindlichkeit*, in its double sense of being affected by our environment and occupying or creating a space or—in Böhme's terms—effusing an atmosphere in it. Accordingly, the living body is the closest nature, the nature that ultimately we are. The ongoing processes of self-world co-constitution mediated by the body as *Leib* might then not so much be represented by touristic trekking tours in the woods with breath-taking landscape views, or whale-watching experiences. Rather, they would occur in the less romantic mode of interrelation and interaction, transforming and being transformed, like the experience of the gardener in the English gardens, the organic farmer, or the urban bee-keeper. In Böhme's words, we enter a partnership relation in which human creativity interacts with nature's own productivity, spontaneity, regeneration capacity, and—yes—also renitence (Böhme 1989). However, the term “nature” seems to be out of place here: what Böhme is talking about is no longer a general object, a totality concept. Rather and more properly, it is what he calls an *ecological fabric* (*ökologisches Gefüge*) in which—to use a Whiteheadian expression—a *buzzing world* of activities, interactions, communication, voices, forms, colors is at work. Ecological fabrics are communication fields in which the self-world relation is disassembled in a complex relational field encompassing multiple voices. As Whitehead writes: “All modern philosophy hinges round the difficulty of describing the world in terms of subject and predicate, substance and quality, particular and universal. The result does violence to the immediate experience which we express in our actions, our hopes, our sympathies, our purposes, and which we enjoy in spite of our lack of phrases for its verbal analysis. We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures; whereas, under some disguise or other, orthodox philosophy can only introduce us to solitary substances, each enjoying an illusory experience.” (PR 49-50).

#### 4. Conclusion

Can a radical relationalism based on Whitehead's philosophy help us develop a different model of environmentalism that frees itself from its imperialistic ontology and enters a fruitful dialogue with practices, visions, and languages rooted in a different framework? I think that indeed Whitehead's critique, articulated from within the very Western tradition of thought and with its instruments, can serve as a bridge for a modest conversation in which we stop exporting some allegedly superior body of thought and step back as learners and listeners. Whitehead's philosophy gives us tools to conceive and translate languages that seem at first incommensurable with our representation of the world in terms of subjects and objects, discrete entities, and self-sustaining substances that enter functional, external relation.

A different axiological scheme is not just a conceptual tool for scholarly disputes in environmental ethics. Rather, it can turn into a powerful set that hosts different languages of valuation in their own right and form. As Martinez-Alier has poignantly stressed, environmental conflicts are ultimately value conflicts, whereby not only different value attributions (which entities entails which value) are contested, but also the whole axiological topography is challenged, albeit with different abilities to reframe it due to asymmetries of power. Changing the axiological scheme, as I claim, is a political act that might—hopefully—help renegotiate the terms of reference for environmental action. This would mark an alternative understanding of our relation to “nature,” and thus a different way of addressing the ecological crisis: rather than following the (romantic) myth of wilderness and the tradition of nature conservation for its own sake (and for our need for nature as a mirror), a different kind of environmentalism would assemble around the idea of cooperation, *Gestaltung*, interaction, co-creation, transformation, and ultimately inhabitation of a common, shared world.

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