

From Instrumental to Intrinsic: Rolston's Theory of Natural Value and Moral Obligation

Zhiguo Wang

School of Philosophy, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

Abstract: *This article takes Rolston's environmental ethics as the research object, aiming to analyze the theory's criticism of the traditional instrumental value theory and the construction logic of the intrinsic value theory, explore the intrinsic connection between the intrinsic value of nature and human moral obligations, and propose practical measures for moral obligations, thereby providing a new research perspective for contemporary environmental ethics research and ecological governance practice.*

Keywords: Rolston Natural value Instrumental, Internality Environmental ethics.

1. Introduction

As the "pioneer" of Western environmental ethics, Rolston broke through the traditional framework of confining ethics to the interpersonal domain and extended ethical concern to the entire natural ecosystem [1]. The revolutionary nature of its theory lies in no longer attaching the value of nature to human subjective needs, but establishing the intrinsic value of nature itself, achieving a paradigm transformation of the value of nature from instrumental to intrinsic, and on this basis, systematically deducing the moral obligation of human beings to protect nature. The author searched for research related to this article on platforms such as China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Google Scholar through keyword search. It was found that the academic community has achieved rich research results on Rolston's environmental ethics at present. However, most of the current research focuses on the demonstration of the relationship between nature and culture. Research on the transformation from instrumentality to internality in Rolston's environmental ethics has not yet been conducted, and there is a lack of systematic studies on this theoretical transition [2]. Based on this, analyzing the intrinsic transformation of natural values and moral obligations in Rolston's environmental ethics has significant research significance for the multi-faceted cognition of this theory.

2. The Instrumental Predicament of the Traditional Theory of Natural Value

2.1 The Instrumental Value Presupposition of Anthropocentrism

The traditional theory of natural value takes anthropocentrism as its core position, regarding human beings as the sole subject and criterion for value, and endows nature with only instrumental value. Under this cognitive framework, the value of nature lies in its ability to meet human economic interests, survival needs and cultural preferences; the value of trees lies in the utilization of wood; the value of rivers lies in irrigation and shipping; and the value of wilderness lies in tourism development. This instrumental presupposition essentially reduces nature to a "resource pool" for human beings, ignoring the inherent significance of nature's existence and its right to development [3]. The subjectivist value theory represented by J. Baird Callicot further strengthens

instrumental cognition. It holds that natural value is a projection of human subjective consciousness and there is no natural value independent of human cognition. This view completely relies on human subjective will for the value of nature, resulting in the loss of objective basis for nature conservation. Just as Rolston criticized, when nature is merely regarded as a tool, "the responsibility for nature conservation is shirked and weakened." The fundamental defect of the traditional instrumental value theory lies in its severing of the integrity and independence of nature, placing humans and nature in an opposing relationship, and providing an ethical excuse for humans' unrestrained exploitation and utilization of nature.

2.2 Ecological and Cultural Consequences of Instrumental Cognition

The practical consequences of instrumental natural value theory are disastrous. Under the guidance of anthropocentrism, industrial civilization aims to conquer and transform nature. Large-scale resource exploitation, environmental pollution and ecological damage have led to a series of global problems such as a sharp decline in biodiversity, abnormal climate and ecosystem imbalance. Rolston pointed out that this "egoistic" cultural consciousness regards nature as a tool for obtaining benefits, erodes the pro-nature genes in the culture, disrupts the balance between nature and culture, and ultimately not only threatens the survival of nature but also hinders the sustainable development of human culture. Instrumental cognition leads to the disruption of the spiritual connection between humans and nature. As a "philosopher who ventured into the wilderness", Rolston deeply realized that the wilderness, as the original state of nature, is the "birthplace of all life", and the modern culture's forgetting and destruction of the wilderness have deprived humanity of the way to trace back to the origin of life and appreciate the value of nature. This disconnection between culture and nature has led to the poverty of the human spiritual world, forming a single value orientation centered on material interests, which in turn has triggered cultural alienation and spiritual crises.

2.3 Establishment of the Intrinsic Value of Nature

Facing the predicament of instrumental value theory, Rolston achieved a theoretical breakthrough, and the core of this lies in establishing the intrinsic value of nature. Rolston pointed out that nature is "the carrier of value, and the essential

attribute of natural value is creativity” [5]. Nature not only meets the instrumental value needs of human beings, but also has its own intrinsic value of existence. Rolston’s environmental ethics regards nature as a creator of value rather than a passive tool. Nature has given birth to life and created rich ecosystems through the process of evolution. This creativity itself has irreplaceable value. On the one hand, it emphasizes the objectivity of natural value, criticizes the view of subjectivist value theory that attaches natural value to human consciousness, and points out that natural value exists independently of human cognition. On the other hand, a triple value system has been established, which includes intrinsic value, instrumental value and system value. Among them, system value plays a core coordinating role, unifying intrinsic value and instrumental value into the overall development of the natural ecosystem.

3. The Derivation from Intrinsic Value to Moral Obligation

3.1 Moral Empowerment of the Intrinsic Value of Nature

Rolston believed that the intrinsic value of nature endows it with a moral status, and a moral status is the prerequisite for generating moral obligations. In traditional ethics, moral obligations exist only among people. However, Rolston extends the boundaries of ethics to nature, and the core basis for this is the intrinsic value of nature. He pointed out that “in the ecological community, there exists not only the instrumental value of nature but also its intrinsic value.” This intrinsic value makes nature an object of moral concern. As a member of the ecological community, humans have the obligation to respect and protect the intrinsic value of nature. The intrinsic value of nature can generate moral obligations because it implies that nature has its own interests and purposes. The evolutionary process of nature and the reproduction and development of life are all manifestations of its own purposes. As beings with rational and moral capabilities, human beings can recognize the intrinsic value of nature and their own purposes. This recognition prompts humans to transcend egoism and develop a moral concern for nature. Rolston emphasized that “humans can embrace, understand, perceive and experience the intrinsic value of nature from an ethical and moral perspective, establish a harmonious relationship with nature, and thereby achieve the goal of protecting the value of nature.”

3.2 Objective Generation of Responsibility

“From nature to culture” is an important logical thread in Rolston’s environmental ethics, which reveals the objective generation process of moral obligations. The core path lies in whether human ethical culture should move towards nature, the connotation and significance of natural values, who owns and uses natural values, and the responsibility of humans to protect nature and natural values. This path reflects the synergy between the intrinsic value of nature and the obligation of humans to protect it. From this logical thread, nature, as the creator of value, holds the ownership of natural value, while humans are merely the “users” and “viewers” of natural value. This division of rights and obligations determines that humans must take on the responsibility of protecting nature. Rolston pointed out that nature is the main

body of the Earth’s life community and the “original source of life and value” [6]. Human survival and development rely on the gifts of nature, so humans have the obligation to maintain the integrity and stability of nature. This obligation is not imposed externally but is an objective requirement based on the intrinsic value of nature, and it is nature’s “moral command” to humanity.

3.3 Subjective Awareness of Responsibility

The logical thread of “from culture to nature” reveals the subjective and conscious process of moral obligations, emphasizing the significant role of culture in promoting human beings to fulfill their moral obligations. Rolston believed that culture is “a kind of ‘development’ that transforms nature”, and its core feature is an altruistic tendency that is close to nature. The important functions of culture lie in “value evaluation” and “aesthetic evaluation”, and these two evaluation functions are important paths for humans to form moral self-awareness. “Value evaluation” requires the cultural community to correctly understand the status and significance of natural values, avoid the “value misplacement fallacy”, guide humanity to transcend anthropocentrism, and establish a holistic environmental value system. “Aesthetic evaluation” evokes human emotional resonance and love for nature through the appreciation and perception of the beauty of life in nature. “The appreciation of beauty can trigger a sense of responsibility because the appreciation of beauty is an exchange of emotions and a manifestation of love.” Through value assessment and aesthetic evaluation, culture can awaken the inherent pro-nature genes of human beings, transforming the moral obligation to protect nature from an objective requirement into a subjective consciousness, and achieving the transition from “culture” to “the culture of nature”.

3.4 Human Roles and Responsibilities

Rolston pointed out that human beings are “people who dwell in nature and culture”, serving as the intermediary between nature and culture [7]. This special status determines the core role of human beings in fulfilling their moral obligation to protect nature. As the only species in the ecological community with rational thinking and moral capabilities, human beings can recognize the intrinsic value of nature and understand the dialectical relationship between nature and culture. Therefore, they have the responsibility to undertake the mission of coordinating the relationship between nature and culture. As the responsibility and commitment of human moral obligations, there is a close connection between natural values and moral obligations. On the one hand, humans can experience the close intrinsic value connection between nature and themselves. The changes in the objective laws of nature have a profound impact on human culture and thought. The transformation of nature is the cornerstone of the formation of human culture. The cultural connotation of moral obligation and the changes in the natural environment are in a close relationship of mutual integration. On the other hand, human beings can transform the protection of the natural environment and ecological balance as their own moral obligation into concrete practical actions, and further promote harmonious coexistence between humans and nature through measures such as government macro-control, policy

and institutional regulations, and changes in life concepts. In Rolston's environmental ethics, it is pointed out that human values "flow in the interaction between natural values and cultural values". In the process of protecting nature, humans can not only maintain the integrity of nature but also achieve their own all-round development, becoming "ecological citizens who respect nature, are highly sensitive to natural values, and develop comprehensively in multiple dimensions" [9].

4. Analysis of the Realization Path of Moral Obligations

4.1 Coordinated Development of Nature and Culture

The primary path to protecting the intrinsic value of nature and fulfilling moral obligations is to balance the value of nature and that of culture. Rolston believes that the value of nature and the value of culture complement each other. "One of the measures to determine whether a philosophy is profound is to see if it regards nature as complementary to culture and gives it the respect it deserves." This balance is not only the responsibility of the state but also the common mission of the international community [10]. In light of the actual situation of China's natural environment, Rolston has a clear theoretical analysis. From aspects such as cultural value, natural value, and ecological analysis, he has provided important theoretical guiding principles for the current environmental problems faced by China, laying an important foundation for the transformation of the Sinicization path of his environmental ethics. Regarding the current situation and pattern of the global ecological environment, he proposed that the protection of the ecological environment should comply with international legal and institutional norms [8]. A coordinated mechanism should be established between the economic construction of each country and the balanced development of the ecological environment. Nature and culture have never existed alone; they are interdependent. Rolston's analysis and argumentation of moral agents aim to provide value guidance for people to correctly handle the relationship between humans and nature from the perspectives of values and ethical beliefs. This poses a challenge to traditional ethics. It expands the scope of ethical concern, establishes the moral status of nature, and uses ethical norms to regulate the relationship between humans and nature, thereby achieving harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

4.2 Ethical Awareness of Being Close to Nature

In human culture, nature holds significant value and meaning. Nature is the home on which human beings depend for survival. The quality of the natural ecology and environment is closely related to the reproduction and survival of human beings. However, with the acceleration of the pace of human social and economic development, the natural ecological environment has been severely damaged. The trauma endured by this ecological environment has brought huge losses to the development of human nature. Human development should not come at the cost of the destruction of the ecological environment. The harmonious coexistence of human beings and nature can promote the sustainable development of human society. According to Rolston's natural ethics, it can

be seen that protecting ecological balance is one of the important contents of human moral obligations [11]. In social production and life, the unity of the rational use of natural value and the protection of natural value is needed. To establish an ethical consciousness between humans and nature, it is necessary to cultivate a collective ethical awareness of being close to and loving nature. Through the education system, government institutions, etc., the significant value and meaning of the coordinated development of nature and culture should be imperceptibly integrated into the moral and ethical values of humanity, making it a tool for the harmonious coexistence of the two. This further evolves into the intrinsic thoughts and cultural values of human beings.

4.3 Shaping Ecological Citizens

Nature has its inherent objective value, that is, organic life individuals, species and ecosystems all have their inherent value of objective existence. Human beings are not merely moral agents but should also be the inhabitants of nature. In the natural ecological environment, animals, plants and humans are all beneficiaries of ecological resources. We should establish harmonious "neighborhood" relations, be friendly and neighborly, and respect all life forms in nature. Humans are both observers of nature and protectors of the natural ecological environment. One should have humanistic care and moral obligations towards nature and all things, and even fulfill the duty of protecting nature. On the one hand, it is necessary to enhance citizens' awareness of natural ecology, enabling citizens of all countries to deeply understand the significant value and connotation of protecting the natural ecological balance, the operational laws of ecosystems, and the impact of human activities on nature. On the other hand, it is necessary to enhance citizens' ecological moral awareness, enabling them to establish a "weak non-anthropocentric" environmental ethics view and regard the protection of nature as a moral obligation [12]. At the same time, it is also necessary to combine the specific circumstances and contents of human social production, and enable citizens to take practical actions in the process of natural ecological protection. Encourage citizens to practice green consumption, low-carbon travel, garbage classification and other environmental protection behaviors in their daily lives, and promote the application and promotion of eco-friendly technologies in their work. Through the shaping of ecological citizens, the moral obligation to protect nature can be transformed into extensive social actions, achieving a positive interaction between nature and culture.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Rolston's theory of natural value and moral obligation has achieved a fundamental shift from the instrumental nature to the intrinsic nature of natural value. Its core contribution lies in establishing the intrinsic value of nature, expanding the boundaries of ethics, and constructing a moral connection between humans and nature. Through the dual logical threads of "from nature to culture" and "from culture to nature", Rolston profoundly revealed the dialectical relationship between nature and culture, systematically deduced the moral obligation of human beings to protect nature, and proposed the practical path of balancing values, cultivating virtue, and shaping ecological citizens. This theory

not only criticizes the mistakes of traditional anthropocentrism, providing a new theoretical paradigm for environmental ethics, but also offers an important theoretical support for contemporary ecological governance. Future research on environmental ethics needs to be based on Rolston's theory, combined with the practical experience of different countries, to improve the theoretical system of natural values and moral obligations, and enhance the operability and practical adaptability of the theory. At the same time, it is necessary to transform the moral obligation to protect nature into extensive social actions through various means such as institutional construction, technological innovation, and cultural dissemination, to achieve a positive interaction between nature and culture and build a community with a shared future for the Earth where humans and nature coexist in harmony.

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