

asked to discuss their reasons and write them on the board. When they went up to write their reason on the board, they had to decide whether their reason had more to do with the intrinsic value of the species (the value of the species for its own sake) or its instrumental value (its use). The children correctly recognized which was which, and knew without coaching that nearly all of the arguments they gave were intrinsic value arguments. There were only two instrumental value arguments given: that seeing-eye dogs were instrumentally valuable because they helped blind people across the street and that barn owls were valuable instrumentally because they kill and eat rats and mice. They also recognized that animals could have both kinds of value. Interestingly, the children did not bring up economic value at all.

We expected the children to introduce rights talk but in the two weeks of lessons, rights never came up. We were prepared to explain that rights would be too strong for animals and plants in a natural ecological system, since if everything had a right to exist and therefore a right not to be eaten, the system could not function. Indirectly, however, it became clear that the children recognized on their own the distinction between preserving a species and protecting the individual members of the species. For instance, in a discussion of wind farms, which can cause the deaths of birds, the children concluded that wind farms were so valuable instrumentally as an alternative energy source that some bird fatalities were acceptable.

At the beginning of his book, *Toward Unity among Environmentalists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Bryan Norton shows anecdotally that children at a very young age can forcefully present economic arguments for the exploitation of nature. Our trial run with value terminology, likewise, suggests that children, if given the words needed, can easily articulate intrinsic value arguments and that in discussions about species they tend to offer such arguments predominantly.

Given that college students when first introduced to intrinsic value usually have extreme difficulty with the terminology, it might seem surprising that children in contrast have so little difficulty. It is likely that the difficulties of college students with intrinsic value is that it was inadvertently kept from them as children and they were exposed to heavy doses of instrumental value in economics and policy in their later education. This exposure may have inoculated them against intrinsic value. As in 1984, if people don't have a word to express a thought, then they are limited in what they can think, and will need to improvise—talking about how they feel or misapplying rights terminology, which they have been taught in other contexts. Making the terminology available only after they are adults is perhaps a little late.

Environmental laws in the U.S.—for example, the Endangered Species Act—often include purpose statements that list values that are supposed to be promoted. Normally, economic value is not included and the promotion of the listed values is supposed to inhibit economic exploitation untempered by conservation. Teaching children how to think about these values without the need for translation into economic and instrumental terms could be a step forward in teaching environmental citizenship—and introducing the term *intrinsic value* could fit in with such instruction, helping them articulate ideas that they might *feel* but not otherwise be able to express.

Two Arguments against Biological Interests

Aaron Simmons*

In both environmental ethics and bioethics, one central issue is the range of entities that are morally considerable. According to one view on this issue, we ought to extend consideration to any entity that possesses interests. But what kinds of entities possess interests? Some philosophers have argued that only sentient beings can have interests, while others have held that all living organisms possess interests in the fulfillment of their biological functions. Is it true that all living organisms have biological interests? The standard arguments made against biological interests are unsatisfactory. There are two central reasons why we ought to reject the idea of biological interests: a metaphysical reason and a normative reason. First, the idea of biological interests implies a metaphysically mysterious account of the nature of how things come to have value for an entity. Second, as normative interests, the idea of biological interests implies that what is good for human beings is at least partly determined by things that are external to themselves, completely independent of their capacities for desires, conflicting with the individual ideal of self-direction, according to which it is fundamentally desirable that how we ought to live (or what is good for one) is grounded in one's own capacities for desires. It is still an open possibility that nonsentient entities may be morally considerable in the sense of having intrinsic value.

I. PRELIMINARY MATTERS

In both environmental ethics and bioethics, one central issue is the range of entities that are *morally considerable*—that is, deserving of moral consideration and respect in our actions. When we deliberate about the morally right thing to do, we consider the ways in which our actions might affect others, negatively or positively, harming them or benefiting them. We give moral weight to their interests. But which entities are deserving of this consideration? Most of us will agree that other human persons are deserving of consideration. Moreover, in this day and age, it's pretty uncontroversial that many nonhuman animals—particularly the ones which are sentient in some sense (i.e., capable of feeling)—are morally considerable to at least some degree. But moving beyond the range of sentient beings, there is a host of nonconscious, nonsentient entities whose moral standing is more controversial. These entities include various forms of human life, such as fetuses, embryos, and those in permanent vegetative states. It also includes various nonhuman entities like plants and microorganisms, as well as whole species and ecosystems.

One view on this basic question of moral considerability is that we ought to extend moral consideration to any entity that possesses *interests* or a *welfare*. Indeed, we might even think that having interests is a requirement for moral

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considerability. In this case, the question becomes whether it's reasonable to think that nonsentient entities such as embryos or plants can have any interests. In other words, is sentience—the capacity to feel—necessary to have interests? A number of philosophers have argued that it is not necessary and that certain nonsentient entities can have interests. The reasons for thinking that some nonsentient entities can have interests vary according to the particular entities in question. In environmental ethics, however, it has been argued that various nonsentient entities in the natural environment can have interests on the grounds that they are living things with biological goals or functions. According to this view, every living organism has interests in the fulfillment of its biological functions.

Is it true that all living organisms have biological interests? I believe it is not true. However, I do not find myself satisfied by the standard arguments made against biological interests. Those who reject the idea of biological interests typically assert that interests belong only to beings which can care about things, but frequently they offer little in the way of justification. Perhaps the most common argument made against biological interests holds that one cannot reasonably attribute interests to nonsentient life forms without also attributing interests to human artifacts. As I suggest below, it is not clear that this argument is correct. But even if it is, it does not truly illuminate why only sentient beings can have interests. In my view, there are two central reasons why we ought to reject the idea of biological interests: a metaphysical reason and a normative reason. In what follows, I discuss these two arguments against biological interests. In doing so, I explain the nature of interests in a way that illuminates precisely why interests must be grounded in the capacity to feel. I then briefly address the remaining questions about the moral considerability of nonsentient life forms.

Philosophers have asked whether nonsentient entities can have interests or a welfare because it has seemed to them that having interests or a welfare is a prerequisite for moral considerability. But why exactly are interests or a welfare required for considerability, and moreover, what exactly does it mean to have interests or a welfare? I propose to use the terms “having a welfare” and “having interests” synonymously. To have a welfare entails the capacity to be harmed or benefited by things. That is, it entails that things can be good or bad for that entity. Similarly, to say that an entity has an interest in something implies simply that that thing is good for that entity. It can also be said that an entity which has interests or a welfare has a *stake* in certain things.¹

It is commonly thought that having interests is a prerequisite for being morally

¹ Joel Feinberg defines *interests* in this way. See Feinberg, “Harm and Self-Interest,” in *Rights, Justice, and the Bounds of Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 45. There may be some question about whether “having interests” is actually a narrower category than “having a welfare,” such that *interests* are reserved for those things that have *significant* value for an entity, things to which it might be appropriate to say that an entity has rights. If the reader is sympathetic to this more narrow understanding of *interests*, then let me simply stipulate that I am using a looser definition of *interests*, one which equates having interests with having a welfare.

considerable. The reasoning for this view appeals to the nature of moral consideration. When we give moral consideration to others, just what is it that we are considering? It would seem that we are considering the ways in which our actions might harm or benefit others. If so, then to be morally considerable, one must be capable of being harmed or benefited. In other words, one must have a welfare or interests. If an entity has no welfare—that is, if it cannot be harmed or benefited by anything—then it would seem there is nothing about that entity in itself to be considered. Along these lines, Kenneth Goodpaster states, “Given the connection between beneficence (or nonmaleficence) and morality, it is natural that limits on moral considerability will come directly from limits on the range of beneficiaries.”² Similarly, Gary Varner indicates that if we hold that a nonsentient life form, such as a plant, cannot have interests, then we are committed to the view that such an entity “can never be of direct moral significance. . . . it can never count for anything in itself but can at most be of instrumental value insofar as its existence satisfies the desires of other beings.”³

II. ARGUMENTS FOR BIOLOGICAL INTERESTS

Why should we believe that every living organism has interests? The primary argument that has been made in defense of this view appeals to the idea that all living things have *goal-oriented tendencies* or *biological functions*. Goodpaster states, “In the face of their obvious tendencies to maintain and heal themselves, it is very difficult to reject the idea of interests on the part of trees (and plants generally) in remaining alive.”⁴ Along these lines, Paul Taylor observes that every living organism is a “teleological center of life.” Taylor explains:

To say [an organism] is a teleological center of life is to say that its internal functioning as well as its external activities are all goal-oriented, having the constant tendency to maintain the organism's existence through time and to enable it successfully to perform those biological operations whereby it reproduces its kind and continually adapts to changing environmental events and conditions.⁵

In short, living organisms strive, in various ways, to preserve themselves and to reproduce. On these grounds, both Goodpaster and Taylor conclude that all living things, whether sentient or not, have interests or a good. That is, they can be harmed or benefited, according to whether something helps or hinders them from performing their biological functions of self-preservation and reproduction. As Taylor points out, it matters not whether an organism is conscious or sentient.

² Kenneth Goodpaster, “On Being Morally Considerable,” in Louis Pojman, ed., *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2001), p. 116.

³ Gary Varner, *In Nature's Interests?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 55.

⁴ Goodpaster, “On Being Morally Considerable,” p. 116.

⁵ Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 121–22.

Because some organisms are not sentient, it may be the case that they are incapable of *taking* an interest in anything. However, it is being suggested, this incapability does not mean that they can't *have* interests in things, for it remains the case that they have biological goals or functions, regardless of whether they are conscious and can take interest in these things.

In addition to observing that all living organisms have goal-oriented tendencies, Goodpaster makes another interesting point in support of his view. He suggests that the goal of every living organism toward the preservation of its own life, when considered from an evolutionary standpoint, may actually be a more important goal for an organism than those goals defined by a being's desires or sentient capacities. He states:

Biologically, it appears that sentience is an adaptive characteristic of living organisms that provides them with a better capacity to anticipate, and so avoid, threats to life. This at least suggests, though of course it does not prove, that the capacities to suffer and to enjoy are ancillary to something more important rather than tickets to considerability in their own right.⁶

There are other arguments to consider in defense of the idea of biological interests. In particular, one interesting argument is put forth by Varner in the form of a thought experiment. Varner asks us to consider the case of Maude, "an unusually intelligent and generally farsighted young adult who has a strong desire to smoke." He explains:

Concerned for her welfare, we bring to her attention the fact that the best available evidence indicates that this smoking will shorten her life by a certain number of years. Suppose that Maude really takes this fact to heart, that the consequences of her conduct are accurately foreseen and adequately realized in her imagination at the present time, but that she nevertheless goes right on smoking.⁷

In this case, is smoking bad for Maude? According to Varner, there is a perfectly ordinary sense here in which Maude has an interest not to smoke. He explains that even if we believe that satisfying Maude's desire to smoke is ultimately in her best interests, there is still some sense in which it harms her. Varner argues that we cannot explain this interest not to smoke unless we abandon the idea that sentience is a requirement for having interests.⁸

Those who believe that only sentient entities can have interests typically hold that interests are things which must be grounded in a being's desires. There are

different, subtle variants on these desire-based theories, including the idea that a being's interests depend not on its actual desires but on the desires it would have under "ideal conditions," such as when it has sufficient information about its ends (the things it desires). However, in the case of Maude, Varner argues that even an idealized desire-based theory fails to explain the clear sense in which smoking is bad for Maude, since we imagine that Maude's desire to keep smoking is an enlightened one based on adequate information. Indeed, we can build into the example any other idealized conditions that we want and still imagine the possibility of Maude maintaining a desire to keep smoking.

In Varner's view, Maude's interest not to smoke (i.e., the fact that smoking is bad for her) cannot be accounted for in this case unless we admit that there is a "fundamentally biological sense of what one's interests are." He explains: "On the physiological level, it is bad for her lungs, and we presume that she has an interest in the proper functioning of all of her organs, even if some other interest or constellation of interests ultimately overrides that interest."⁹ Varner concludes that having desires is not required for having interests: an individual organism has interests in those things which help fulfill its biological functions, which means that every living organism has interests, including those which lack sentience.

III. STANDARD ARGUMENTS AGAINST BIOLOGICAL INTERESTS

Despite the arguments for biological interests, a number of philosophers have maintained that only sentient beings can have interests. Two classic statements of this position come from Peter Singer and Joel Feinberg. According to Singer, "The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a prerequisite for having interests at all." If an entity cannot suffer, he explains, "nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any difference to its welfare."¹⁰ Likewise, Feinberg argues, "Trees are not the sorts of beings who have their 'own sakes,' despite the fact that they have biological propensities. Having no conscious wants or goals of their own, trees cannot know satisfaction or frustration, pleasure or pain." In Feinberg's view, interests are things which are necessarily "compounded out of *desires* and *aims*, both of which presuppose something like *belief*, or cognitive awareness."¹¹

But why should we agree with this view that only sentient entities can have interests or that interests are necessarily compounded out of desires? It is important to understand here that while it might be true that nonsentient entities cannot have interests, the thought that nonsentient entities cannot feel or care about anything is not in itself a sufficient justification. For in this case, we should still want to know, why do interests belong only to entities that can feel or care about things? What is

⁶ Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable," p. 115.

⁷ Varner, *In Nature's Interests?* p. 58.

⁸ Varner has since indicated that a "mental state theory" of interests can account, in some ways, for the idea that smoking is contrary to Maude's interests, namely, if it frustrates other desires which she possesses (e.g., a desire to climb stairs comfortably). See Varner's review of Nicholas Agar's book, *Life's Intrinsic Value: Science, Ethics, and Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), which appears in *Environmental Ethics* 25 (2003): 413–16.

⁹ Varner, *In Nature's Interests?* p. 58.

¹⁰ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, New Revised Edition (New York: Avon Books, 1990), pp. 7–8.

¹¹ Joel Feinberg, "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations," in *Rights, Justice, and the Bounds of Liberty*, pp. 167–71.

the special significance of the capacity to feel or care about things? To justify the view that only sentient beings can have interests, this question must be answered. I come back to this point later.

Probably the most common argument which has been made in defense of the view that sentience is a requirement for having interests is a form of *reductio ad absurdum*. Feinberg famously makes this sort of argument. In contemplating whether plants can have interests, he observes that we may be inclined to think they do on the grounds that plants, like humans and animals, have certain *needs*, as defined by their goals or functions. A plant needs water and sunshine in order to grow and live. It is tempting to conclude from these needs that plants have an interest in these things. However, Feinberg suggests doing so would be a mistake because human artifacts such as cars (or even buildings and paintings) may also be said to have certain needs—most cars need gas in order to function. Indeed, we also speak of what is good or bad for cars. But most of us will agree that it would be absurd to conclude that a car has interests or a welfare, in any morally relevant sense. We might say that gas is good for a car, but this good is not really the car's own good: it is a human good, determined by our desire to have cars that can reliably take us places. Similarly, Feinberg claims, "Plants may need things in order to discharge their functions, but their functions are assigned by human interests, not their own."¹² They do not really have a good of their own.

Those who defend the idea of biological interests have not been convinced by Feinberg's *reductio* argument. Goodpaster replies:

Nor will it do to suggest, as Feinberg does, that the needs (interests) of living things like trees are not really their own but implicitly *ours*. . . . As if it were human interests that assigned to trees the tasks of growth or maintenance! The interests at stake are clearly those of the living things themselves, not simply those of the owners or users or other human persons involved.¹³

Taylor considers whether his view might imply that complex, self-regulating machines like space satellites, chess-playing computers, or assembly-line robots have interests. He replies that there is a fundamental difference between these machines and living organisms. In the case of the machines, he explains, "The ends they are programmed to accomplish are not purposes of their own, independent of the human purposes for which they were made." Their ends are "built into them by their human creators."¹⁴ On the other hand, he explains that a living organism's goals are inherent to the organism, originating from the organisms themselves. Their goals are independent of human purposes.

David DeGrazia, supporting the idea that only sentient beings can have interests, has challenged this sort of reply from Taylor and Goodpaster. Taylor and Goodpaster

seem to imply that the critical difference between living organisms and human artifacts is that only the former have their own, independent goals, whereas artifacts only have the goals that we give them and for which we create them. In reply, DeGrazia points out that "through breeding and genetic engineering, we can *create* sentient beings for instrumental purposes."¹⁵ Therefore, he concludes, the fact that human artifacts such as cars were created for instrumental, human purposes can't in itself disqualify them from having their own good. To be clear, DeGrazia does not actually think that human artifacts have interests, but like Feinberg, he believes it's unclear how we can deny interests to artifacts if we attribute them to nonsentient organisms.

IV. SHORTCOMINGS OF THE REDUCTIO ARGUMENT

The *reductio* argument against the idea of biological interests is unsatisfying for a couple of reasons. To begin with, I am not convinced that it is even correct. As we saw, Feinberg claims that plants may need things to perform their functions, but that their functions are determined by human interests. It is hard not to agree with Goodpaster when he replies that it seems rather ridiculous to suggest that a plant's goals of growth, self-preservation, and reproduction are assigned by human beings. Clearly, these goals are independent goals belonging to the organisms themselves. Plants perform these functions completely independent of human interests. On the other hand, machines and their functions are created by human beings. A car and its function of transporting people to places is the creation of humans.

As noted above, Degrazia points out that we are capable now of creating living and sentient organisms for instrumental, human purposes. This capability poses an interesting challenge to the biological interests view. However, even when we create organisms (plants or animals) for instrumental purposes, it seems there is still a sense in which these organisms have their own goals. We may have created a life form and done so for our own interests, but quite independently of our purposes, this life form will still naturally seek to preserve itself, grow, and reproduce.¹⁶ On the other hand, it's not clear that non-living, human-created artifacts have functions in the same independent sense.

Even if it turns out that the *reductio* argument is correct, however, it is still unsatisfying in another way. It may give us a good reason to believe that only sentient beings can have interests, but it fails to explain just why only sentient beings can have interests. What is it about the nature of sentience and having interests that makes it the case that only sentient beings can have interests? At the very least, then, the *reductio* argument needs to be supplemented with a more illuminating argument that addresses this question.

¹² Feinberg, "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations," p. 170.

¹³ Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable," p. 116.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, pp. 123–24.

¹⁵ David DeGrazia, *Taking Animals Seriously* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 229.

¹⁶ Varner makes a similar point. See *In Nature's Interests?* pp. 69–70.

V. THE SUBJECTIVIST ARGUMENT AGAINST BIOLOGICAL INTERESTS

Although I have suggested that the argument for biological interests may withstand Feinberg's reductio challenge, it is problematic for another, more fundamental reason. As I've argued, it seems reasonable to think that living organisms have goal-oriented tendencies which are independent of human purposes, in a way that non-living human artifacts do not. However, this argument is not sufficient to justify the belief that every living organism has interests. It is one thing to admit that organisms have independent goals, but it is another thing entirely to say that these goals are *good* for them. That an organism has independent goals does not itself make the goals good for the organism. The question, then, is why should we think not only that nonsentient organisms have inherent goals, but also that these goals are good for them?

Pondering this question, I believe, leads us to the fundamental problem for the idea of biological interests. Although it is reasonable to think that living organisms have independent goal tendencies, the notion that their goals *have value* for them is metaphysically mysterious. The critical issue here is how it ever makes sense to think that something has value for an entity. What is the nature of that value? What does it consist in? Where does it come from? My claim is that the idea of biological interests implies a mysterious or unreal account of the nature of value.

Let us first consider a view of the nature of interests which would be fairly reasonable and non-mysterious. According to this view, an entity's interests or its good must be compounded out of its desires or its capacities for desires. It seems clear that there is a basic link between *desiring* and *valuing*. When we desire a thing, we regard that thing as good to some degree, meaning simply that we have some positive feeling toward that thing.¹⁷ Now, the fact that we *regard* a thing as good doesn't necessarily mean it's *actually* good for us—sometimes we desire things which are not actually good for us. But because of the link between desiring and valuing, the thought that satisfying our desires is *prima facie* good for us is not entirely mysterious. Moreover, when something that's actually good for us doesn't coincide with anything we actually desire, it's commonly the case that this thing would satisfy desires we are at least capable of having. For example, take the case of a person who is suicidal over a failed romantic relationship. Although this person has no desire to live, many of us would be inclined to think that continued life would be good for this person. The desire-based view can make sense of such a judgment because this person is capable of desiring to live, and we would say this person *ought* to desire to live.¹⁸

¹⁷ Of course, sometimes we desire things that we regard as bad—for example, a woman who wants to use drugs as the result of an addiction, but who also wishes she could quit and regards drug use as bad. But even though we may regard a thing we desire as bad overall, insofar as we have a desire for that thing, we do regard it as good to some degree—we do have some positive feeling toward that thing.

¹⁸ Ultimately a desire-based view needs to explain what makes some capacities for desires normatively more authoritative than others. Why should this person desire to live, as opposed to wanting to die?

In the case of nonsentient, non-desiring entities, however, it seems entirely mysterious how things could have value for them. The argument for biological interests proposes that every living organism has a good consisting in the fulfillment of its biological functions or goal tendencies. But why is the fulfillment of their goal tendencies good for them? It is unclear where that value, that good, is supposed to come from if not from an entity's capacity to desire or care about things—if not from an entity's capacity to regard things as good.

One option would be to suggest that this value is somehow part of "the fabric" of the natural world, built into living organisms themselves. But the idea that in addition to the various physical features of the natural world, there are also these value features sounds very strange. It does not fit in with our ordinary experiences of the world. How do we detect these value features? We can use our senses to observe organisms performing their functions, but we do not actually observe that the fulfillment of these functions is good for them. Moreover, how are these value features supposed to be linked with the physical features of an organism? It all sounds rather odd and implausible.

The problem, as I conceive of it, is Humean in nature. To claim that living organisms have biological functions or goal-oriented tendencies is a purely descriptive claim about what is the case. On the other hand, to claim that the fulfillment of these functions or goals is *good* for the organisms is a normative or evaluative claim. As Hume observed, such a move from *what is the case* to *what is good* (or what ought to be the case) requires some explanation and justification. If a living organism is not capable of caring about the fulfillment of its functions or goals, then it's wholly unclear what this justification is supposed to be.¹⁹ If an entity is not capable of desiring or caring about anything, then it's wholly unclear what that justification is supposed to be. Now, it might be replied that it is also a descriptive claim to state that a being desires or is capable of desiring something, and therefore, that a desire-based account of interests is faced with the same problem of deriving values from descriptive facts. However, my suggestion is that because of the close and familiar connection between desiring and valuing, the thought that satisfying a being's desires is *prima facie* good for it is not so strange or mysterious.

I believe this argument explains why it is that only sentient, desiring beings can have interests. Interests are normative concepts, entailing what is good for an entity. We are able to make sense of these value concepts by explaining them, in some fashion, in terms of what an entity is capable of desiring or caring about. However, minus the capacity to desire or care about things, it is unclear how it makes sense to say that anything is good for an entity—it is unclear where that value is supposed

This is a complex issue to be addressed in another place. My central point here is simply that there is a close connection between desiring things and valuing them, which helps us make sense of the idea that a thing has value for an entity.

¹⁹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740). My argument here is also indebted to J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1977).

to come from. Feinberg was incorrect to claim that the functions of plants are assigned by human interests, for these functions truly are inherent to the organisms themselves. It does seem, however, that the *interests* assigned to those functions is a human projection.²⁰

What then should we think about statements in ordinary language that reference what is good or bad for living organisms in a strictly biological sense? We often speak of what is good or bad for one's body or one's health, or what would benefit or harm one's body, independent of what one desires or ideally would desire. In some sense, this language seems perfectly reasonable and useful, and it seems absurd to suggest that we completely abandon these sorts of statements. My thought is that we need not abandon this kind of language; we just need to understand how these kinds of statements must be interpreted if they are to be sensible. It seems perfectly reasonable to speak of all living organisms as having certain biological goals or functions which they non-consciously work to achieve. When we speak of what is "good" or "bad" for an organism in a strictly biological sense, we are referring to those things which will help or hinder the organism in achieving its goals. Doing so makes perfect sense so long as we understand that the language of biological interests is more metaphorical than literal; that we are referring solely to the fulfillment of biological goals or functions; and that it does not make sense to think that these goals literally have value for the organisms in any sense which is independent of an organism's sentient, affective capacities.

VI. THE ARGUMENT FROM SELF-DIRECTION

There is another important reason why I believe we ought to reject the idea of biological interests. The previous argument gave us metaphysical reasons to reject biological interests: interests, being normative concepts, appear to make sense (i.e., are explainable) only when derived from an entity's capacities for desire. But there is also a normative reason why we ought to reject the idea of biological interests, and that is because it violates a fundamental value of *self-direction*. Self-direction is the idea that *how I ought to live is ultimately determined within myself*, not by

²⁰ Hume's *is/ought* problem is not new for environmental ethics. Most notably, J. Baird Callicott questions whether environmentalists violate the fact/value dichotomy when they move from ecological insights about nature to claims that nature has intrinsic value or moral standing. See Callicott, "Hume's *Is/Ought* Dichotomy and the Relation of Ecology to Leopold's Land Ethic," *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 117–27. The problem which Callicott discusses is distinct from the problem I am raising, in that Callicott's problem focuses on the claim that *nature has intrinsic value* whereas my problem focuses on the claim that *nonsentient life forms have interests*. Both claims are normative, but they are normative in different senses. To say that an entity has intrinsic value is normative in a *moral* or *third-person* sense, meaning it entails that moral agents have some obligation to respect that value or at least that they ought to take it into consideration (i.e., give it some weight). On the other hand, to say that an entity has interests is normative *not* in a moral or third-person sense but only in a *first-person* or *prudential* sense. The fact that an entity has interests does not in itself entail anything about what other moral agents ought to do or take into consideration. However, it does entail that something has value or is good from the perspective or standpoint of the entity itself. For example, if an entity has an interest to live, this means that life has value for that entity.

anything external to me. More specifically, I take this to mean that how I ought to live is ultimately determined by or grounded in my own psychological capacities, particularly my own desiring capacities. I propose that to be self-directed—to be a person whose norms or standards of how one should live are ultimately grounded within oneself—is a fundamentally desirable thing. Therefore, any doctrine which entails that how we ought to live is determined by something external to ourselves is one that we have an ethical reason to reject because it violates the ideal of self-direction. The doctrine of biological interests implies just such a violation, and therefore, we have reason to reject this doctrine.

To be clear, the ideal of self-direction is distinct from a certain standard notion of autonomy which we might call autonomy of action or decision making. According to this standard notion, autonomy essentially consists of the capacity to make decisions or act according to the values one has accepted after critical reflection. We see this notion of autonomy in medical ethics, for example, where it's commonly thought that medical professionals should respect the autonomy of patients, such as by getting their informed consent for treatment or research. My argument is not that the idea of biological interests conflicts with our capacity to act according to our own values. In contrast to autonomy of action, self-direction refers to the autonomy of the norms which we ought to follow in our lives. My claim is that it is fundamentally desirable that the norms we ought to follow in our lives are ultimately determined within ourselves, not by anything external to ourselves, and that the doctrine of biological interests contradicts this fundamental value.

Why should we care about the ideal of self-direction? To be self-directed is part of being a free, autonomous, self-governing individual. I make the assumption here that individual freedom and autonomy is a fundamental human value. To lack self-direction—to be a person whose norms of how one should live are determined by something outside of oneself—is to be ruled by or enslaved to some external authority. Consider the thought that how we ought to live is determined not within ourselves but by something external to us, such as another person, a government, or God's will—for example, we must live a certain devout lifestyle because it is demanded by some religious authority, or we should not speak against the government because the government forbids it. In this case, we would not be free, autonomous beings but rather beings who are ruled by someone or something other than ourselves. I contend that this state of affairs is neither desirable nor respectable. To embrace the ideal of individual freedom, we must reject any system which proposes that how we ought to live is decided by something external to ourselves.²¹

²¹ My argument here is inspired to some degree by some of the great anarchist thinkers, including Michael Bakunin and Emma Goldman, as well as a George Crowder's examination of classical anarchist thinkers in his book *Classical Anarchism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). In *God and the State* (Sheffield: Pirate Press, 1980), Bakunin argues that what is most respectable about humans is their power to think and desire to rebel. He suggests that the existence of God necessarily implies that humans are slaves and, therefore, he proclaims that if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him, inverting Voltaire's well-known statement that if God didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent him.

One reason why we might question whether self-direction is actually desirable is because it might seem to conflict with the common-sense assumption that there are some things that people ought to do which they may not want to do. We assume this, for one, in the case of a person's interests. We sometimes think that what is good for a person—and therefore, what he or she ought to do—is not necessarily what that person wants to do. For example, we might say this of someone who eats very unhealthy, regularly uses hard drugs, or has a bad habit of procrastinating important life responsibilities. Similarly, we tend to assume that people sometimes ought to do what they may not want to do in the case of morality. For instance, I should keep my promises even if I don't want to do so, and Jeffrey Dahmer should not have cannibalized young men even if that's what he desired to do. The ideal of self-direction might seem to imply that a person ought to do always and only what he or she desires to do.

In reply to this concern, it is not clear that the ideal of self-direction must contradict this basic assumption about how we ought to live. Self-direction does not mean simply that we ought to live however we want to live. Rather, it means that how I ought to live is determined *within myself*, by my own psychological capacities. This ideal leaves open ways in which what I ought to do can be grounded in my psychological capacities without necessarily being what I presently want to do. For example, it is compatible with the ideal of self-direction to hold that what we morally ought to do is grounded in desires we are capable of having, desires we would actually have and identify with given certain idealized conditions. To take this example a little further, it could be argued that as self-aware persons, each of us possesses certain capacities to empathize with other persons and other sentient beings. Although at times a person may not actually want to morally respect another individual, he or she is capable of doing so and would wholeheartedly want to do so, given sufficient development of his or her latent, human, moral, empathetic capacities.

Similarly, in terms of identifying a person's interests (i.e., what he or she ought to do for reasons of prudence), those who ground interests in psychological capacities such as desire capacities have a number of options open to them which do not amount to holding that it is always good to follow one's desires. For one thing, desire theorists can argue that a person's desires should be followed only if they are sufficiently informed. For example, a person should have pertinent information about the correct means of satisfying her desires (e.g., this is what you ought to do if you want to stay healthy) and the consequences of following her desires (e.g., this is what may happen to you if you continue to smoke). Additionally, a person sometimes has desires which he or she does not identify with (e.g., temptations to engage in destructive behavior which conflicts with a person's more "core" desires). Moreover, it may be the case that a person would not identify with certain desires given other idealized conditions, such as awareness of the ways in which cultural conditioning has shaped our desires and the development of our latent, human psychological capacities. For example, a racist may come to abandon his or her racist desires given

the development of his or her capacity to empathize with other human beings of all races. Similarly, a person who feels worthless or suicidal may come to have a better appreciation for him or herself, and want to accomplish more in life, given the development of certain human capacities to love oneself. In short, it is open to the desire theorist to argue that, in some sense, not all of a person's desires are truly autonomous (i.e., truly one's own desires) and that truly autonomous desires are the only ones a person ought to follow.

Admittedly, all of these options for the desire theorist still leave open some major questions which must be answered. It is beyond the scope of this paper to try to address them here, or to address other problems which have been raised against a desire-based theory of interests. My point is that this idea that how we ought to live must be determined by our own psychological capacities is not necessarily committed to the view that we ought to do always and only what we presently desire to do.

Let us suppose that, indeed, self-direction is fundamentally desirable. How does the doctrine of biological interests violate this ideal? According to this doctrine, every living organism has interests in the fulfillment of its biological functions or goals. This doctrine includes not only nonsentient organisms but also the sentient ones such as human beings. The doctrine of biological interests holds that as living organisms, what is good for us is partly constituted by what would help fulfill our biological functions. Varner explicitly makes this point and takes it to be an advantage of the doctrine of biological interests, since he believes there is a familiar, biological sense in which something can be good or bad for us, entirely independent of our desires or enlightened desires. His example of Maude the enlightened smoker is intended to illustrate this point: Maude has no desire to quit smoking but, Varner claims, there is a biological sense in which smoking is bad for her. But it is in this way that the doctrine of biological interests conflicts with the ideal of self-direction, for it implies that at least some of what is good for us or how we ought to live is determined not at all by our desire capacities but rather by things which are completely external to or independent of those capacities: the biological functions of our bodies. It is ethically objectionable in the same way it is objectionable to suggest that a person's good is decided by the beliefs of others, the laws of government, or the dictates of religion.

This conflict between self-direction and the doctrine of biological interests can be illustrated through a number of examples. Take the case of a terminally ill and suffering person who wishes to commit suicide so as to spare him or herself from any further suffering and indignity. What is in this person's interest? What is good for this person? According to the doctrine of biological interests, it would be good for this person to continue living and bad for him or her to choose to die, regardless of what his or her considered desire may be, because life is one of the biological functions of the human body, similar to any organism. As another example, the doctrine of biological interests would also seem to imply that it's in every human's interest to have children, even if our considered desire is not to procreate, because

reproduction and continuation of the species is another biological function of living organisms. In both of these examples, it is objectionable that an individual's good (and what he or she ought to do) is determined, in part, by things completely independent of his or her desires or psychological capacities. Neither example portrays a person who is truly free and autonomous.

To be fair, defenders of biological interests typically do not believe that a human's biological functions are the sole determinant of a person's interests. Varner, for example, states that a person's interests are constituted by not only biological functions but also actual desires and the desires a person would have under certain "idealized" conditions. In the kinds of situations I described above, then—as in the case of Maude—a person may end up with biological interests that conflict with desire-based interests. Varner proposes that we should adopt "a rough hierarchy of interests," according to which a person's projects and desires would generally be more important than her biological interests.²² Similarly, Taylor suggests that the most important interests of a human are those things which are necessary to pursue the goals which make one's life meaningful and worthwhile, including one's life, autonomy, and rationality.²³

Varner's and Taylor's proposals leave some concerns about the extent to which one's biological interests can ever trump one's desire-based interests. Varner's claim that a person's desire-based interests are "generally more important" than biological interests leaves open the possibility that, in some cases, a person's biological interests could trump his or her desire-based interests. Varner does not detail specific kinds of cases in which he thinks this possibility could occur. However, for a person's biological interests to trump desire-based interests would be a clear violation of the value of self-direction. More fundamentally, it seems objectionable to suggest that even part of a person's good is determined by something outside him or herself, outside of his or her mind, or that the person's interests which are rooted in desire capacities must compete to some extent with biological interests to determine what is in the person's best or overall interests.

The argument from self-direction also illuminates what is wrong with Goodpaster's suggestion that from an evolutionary standpoint, sentience is subordinate to life in terms of its importance for an organism. It may be the case that, studied scientifically, sentience evolved in order to aid an organism in preserving its life. However, why should this evolutionary standpoint determine what is good or important for an individual? Like the notion of biological interests, it would appear to violate the basic ideal of self-direction. As Bertrand Russell proclaims, "It is for us to determine the good life, not for Nature."²⁴

²² Varner, *In Nature's Interests?* pp. 89–97.

²³ Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, pp. 269–73.

²⁴ Bertrand Russell, "What I Believe," in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 348–49.

VII. INTERESTS AND MORAL CONSIDERABILITY

I have just argued that there are both metaphysical and ethical reasons for rejecting the idea of biological interests. If nonsentient entities cannot have interests, does this disqualify them from moral consideration? As I previously explained, many authors writing on the moral status of nonsentient life forms have focused their attention on whether nonsentient life can have interests. They have done so under the belief that having interests is a basic requirement for being morally considerable. The reasoning behind this belief consists in the thought that moral consideration just is consideration of the interests of others, of how our actions may harm or benefit others. If an entity lacks interests—if it cannot be harmed or benefited by anything we do—then there is nothing to consider.

I am not convinced though that having interests is required for being morally considerable. I am going to suggest there are two senses in which it makes sense to speak of a thing as morally considerable: a *narrow* sense and a *broad* sense. The narrow sense of moral considerability is the sense just explained above. According to this sense, to be morally considerable entails that an entity is *owed* moral consideration by moral agents when they are deciding how they should act. This sort of considerability is the basis for moral obligations or duties that we have to others. Now, it seems correct to hold that considerability in this sense requires that an entity has interests. Entities which are considerable in this sense have a justified claim that they are owed some form of moral consideration or respect. They need not be capable of making the claim themselves; they merely must have some claim to respectful treatment. This claim is something which speaks on behalf of an entity, and therefore, to have such a claim requires that an entity has a behalf, a welfare, that can be represented by the claim.²⁵

Now, suppose that an entity is not capable of having interests, and thus, has no behalf to be represented by a moral claim. How can such an entity be morally considerable? What is there to be considered? My suggestion is that while the narrow sense of considerability targets the interests of entities, it is also possible to give consideration, a broader sense of consideration, to the *intrinsic value* of entities, including entities which may have no interests. By "intrinsic value," I have in mind simply the idea that a thing has value for its own sake or as an end in itself, in contrast to having instrumental value, value a thing has as a means to some other thing. Unlike the narrow sense of considerability which involves having a moral claim to consideration, there is no reason to think that having interests is required for having intrinsic value. There is nothing about the concept of intrinsic value that should lead us to think that it doesn't make sense, conceptually speaking, for a thing to have intrinsic value without having interests.

²⁵ My reasoning here draws from Joel Feinberg's thinking on why having moral rights requires possessing interests. See Feinberg, *Rights, Justice, and the Bounds of Liberty*.

It is important here to understand the difference between stating, on the one hand, that a thing has value for its own sake (i.e., it has intrinsic value) and, on the other hand, that things have value for an entity (i.e., it has interests). The claim that something has intrinsic value is an ethical claim, whereas the claim that some entity has interests is not itself an ethical claim from the standpoint of another being (i.e., a third-person standpoint). It is possible to think that an entity has interests but deny that it has intrinsic value, without having misused the concept of interests or intrinsic value. The concept of an entity having interests does not itself entail that the entity has intrinsic value or that I ought to morally consider its interests. Now, it may turn out that everything which has interests also has intrinsic value (and therefore, is morally considerable) in virtue of its having interests, but this conclusion must be established through a moral argument.

It is possible, then, that an entity could lack interests—and therefore be unqualified for the narrow sense of considerability—but still be morally considerable in the broader sense of having intrinsic value. This distinction allows us to see that Varner is confused when he claims that those who hold that having interests requires having desires “commits one to the view that an entity that, like a plant, lacks desires . . . can never count for anything in itself but can at most be of instrumental value insofar as its existence satisfies the desires of other beings.”²⁶ Although having interests may be required for considerability in the narrow sense, there is no reason to think it’s required for having intrinsic value. The fact, then, that nonsentient life forms cannot have interests—as I have argued—does not commit us to the view that they cannot have intrinsic value. What could be the basis for their intrinsic value if they do not have interests? This is the topic for another discussion. However, some possible answers include the idea that things which are *living* or things which are *wild* (free of human, rational control) have intrinsic value.

VIII. CONCLUSION

I have made the case here that the standard *reductio* argument against the idea of biological interests is unsuccessful and non-illuminating, but nevertheless that there are two basic reasons why we ought to reject the idea of biological interests. Both reasons ultimately hinge on the fact that interests are normative concepts. First, the idea of biological interests implies a metaphysically mysterious account of the nature of how things come to have value for an entity. Defenders of biological interests contend that all living organisms have interests insofar as they have biological functions or goal-tendencies. However, even if organisms have biological functions, it’s unclear what makes those functions have value for the organisms. A normative claim is derived from a purely descriptive one and it’s unclear what the explanation or justification is supposed to be. Second, as normative concepts,

²⁶ Varner, *In Nature’s Interests?* p. 55. Varner has suggested to me that he actually recognizes a parallel distinction to the one I am making here.

the idea of biological interests implies that what is good for human beings is at least partly determined by things which are external to themselves, completely independent of their capacities for desires. This idea conflicts with the individual ideal of self-direction, according to which it is fundamentally desirable that how one ought to live (or what is good for one) is grounded in one’s own capacities for desires. Despite these reasons for rejecting the idea of biological interests, I have suggested that it is still an open possibility that nonsentient entities can be morally considerable in the sense of having intrinsic value.²⁷

²⁷ In his comments on this paper, Gary Varner asks how my arguments in this paper apply to sentient beings which are not moral agents, such as animals. As a metaphysical point, it makes sense to think that, like humans, what has value for animals must be grounded in animals’ desires or their capacities for desires. That is, *x* cannot have value for animals unless it satisfies some desire which they are capable of having. In fact, I have argued in another paper that it does not make sense to think that animals’ future opportunities for pleasure have value for them now unless animals are capable of caring about those future opportunities. See Aaron Simmons, “Do Animals Have an Interest in Continued Life? In Defense of a Desire-Based Approach,” *Environmental Ethics* 31 (2009): 375–92. It can also be argued in terms of this position that what is good for animals does not always correspond with what they actually desire, but rather sometimes corresponds with what they would desire under certain idealized epistemic conditions (e.g., the cat would not desire to eat the cat food if it knew and could understand that the food was poisoned). However, the argument from self-direction seems less applicable to animals. It gives us reason to reject the idea of biological interests specifically in the case of beings, like most adult humans, who are capable of choosing which norms they will live by and who can understand the value of being a self-directed and autonomous individual.