

# ENVIRONMENTAL WELLBEING: MOVING FROM A “CARE IMPERATIVE” TO THE “PROTECT IMPERATIVE”: THE ENVIRONMENTAL ILLBEING PUZZLE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a definition of environmental wellbeing that is on par with human wellbeing. Absent the science of ecosystem functioning, whose shorthand is biodiversity; we risk viewing environmental illbeing as environmental wellbeing, and vice versa, as we do when we admire either formal gardens or pinky-yellow sunsets, caused by dust and haze. Human beings have a duty to monitor and boost environmental wellbeing, since human wellbeing depends on environmental wellbeing. The duty to care for some “cared-for,” which is grounded in Kant’s notion of duty, is central to the ethics of care. By contrast, care aesthetics treats each creature as a cared-for and aims to boost the wellbeing of the surroundings, since every inhabitant contributes to environmental wellbeing. Care aesthetics is thus proactive rather than reactive. Ultimately, the “protection” imperative proves more successful than the abstract “care” imperative, since its holistic demand to promote environmental wellbeing prevents environmental illbeing.

## KEYWORDS

Care, Wellbeing, Illbeing, Biodiversity, Ecosystem Functioning

That neither environmental wellbeing nor environmental illbeing has entered the environmental philosophy lexicon is problematic. Given the widespread use of the term “environmental health,” some consider the term “environmental wellbeing” superfluous. However, the term “environmental health” has nothing to do with a particular environment’s health. It rather refers to “aspects of *human health* (including quality of life) [emphasis mine] that are determined by physical, chemical, biological, social, and psychosocial factors in the environment.”<sup>1</sup> As we shall see, scientists measure an ecosystem’s health in terms of “ecosystem functioning,” which offers a metric for environmental wellbeing. Ecosystem functioning refers to “‘the joint effects of all processes (fluxes of energy and matter) that sustain an ecosystem’ over time and space through biological activities.”<sup>2</sup> Unless people are familiar with the array of variables comprising ecosystem functioning, they don’t know whether a particular ecosystem functions or not. However, terms like environmental wellbeing/illbeing get the point across.

I imagine some environmental philosophers considering the term “environmental illbeing” even more controversial than the term environmental wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> For example, scientific cognitivists may worry that people will conflate environmental illbeing with “unsightliness.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, positive aestheticians consider nature inherently beautiful, so they are likely to consider any notion of environmental illbeing incoherent, if not an oxymoron.<sup>5</sup> To remain consistent with these two philosophical positions, I consider environmental illbeing an ethical position, comparable to the statement “something *bad* is happening/has happened here,” rather than an aesthetic evaluation on par with “this looks/smells/tastes/sounds/feels *bad*.” I too endorse the view that “negative aesthetic values” don’t pertain to nature, since whatever makes nature “aesthetically negative” typically reflects human negligence.<sup>6</sup> Although my focus here is ethics, I consider environmental wellbeing and illbeing to be *aesthetic* metrics, since they characterize regularity/deformity, though in terms that are mind-independent and avoid judgments of taste.

With this paper, I begin by proposing a definition of environmental wellbeing on par with that of human wellbeing, such that environmental wellbeing indicates the presence of biotic and/or abiotic features that encourage the environment to flourish, whereas environmental illbeing suggests the presence of features that hinder environmental flourishing. Recognizing environmental illbeing seems easier than identifying environmental wellbeing. For example,

we notice swathes of dead trees owing either to acid rain or forest fires, schools of fish washed ashore, fewer bird varieties than before, surface water suffering eutrophication/algal blooms, and species depletion. Absent science, however, we risk gauging environmental illbeing as environmental wellbeing, and vice versa; as we do when we admire either formal gardens or pinky-yellow sunsets caused by dust and haze. I next note that although environmental wellbeing seems independent of human wellbeing, scientists currently view both as linked in more ways than one, making it incumbent upon human beings to prioritize environmental wellbeing.

Given human beings' tendency to degrade environments, I demonstrate why care aesthetics, though not care ethics, promotes human flourishing, since care aesthetics obligates human beings to protect environmental wellbeing and prevent environmental illbeing.<sup>7</sup> I conclude that the "protect imperative" supersedes the "care imperative," since protecting nature mandates being proactive, not reactive. Grounded in Immanuel Kant's moral duty of self-preservation, such a move not only indicates changed values and actions, but it mandates hindering the actions of those who pose life-threatening harms.<sup>8</sup>

#### HOW WELLBEING ENGENDERS SKILLSETS THAT DEFLECT ILLBEING

Elsewhere, I've defined human wellbeing as the union of access and capacities.<sup>9</sup> Positive self-assessments of human wellbeing signal some combination of access and capacity, similar in effect to Hannah Arendt's notion of freedom, where the "I will" and "I can" coincide.<sup>10</sup> I distinguish happiness from human wellbeing, since the former is a psychological disposition, whereas the latter reflects material conditions. Kant, however, considered them synonymous. According to Julie Lund Hughes, Kant's notion of happiness is "simply getting what you want."<sup>11</sup> In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant describes happiness as "the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence *everything goes according to his wish and will*."<sup>12</sup> It's thus no wonder then that Kant, who worried that happiness and duty don't coincide, rejected the "doctrine of happiness."<sup>13</sup>

I concur with Kant that happiness is irrelevant, since if one applies the categorical imperative, then everyone is morally justified in "simply getting what they want," which is ultimately impossible, since it leaves no one happy. Kant himself admitted this when he

claimed that doing the right thing doesn't always result in happiness.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, poor people routinely report "happiness," whereas many wealthy people report "unhappiness."<sup>15</sup> Either what wealthy people want remains out of reach or nothing could possibly make them happy. Although happiness differs from human wellbeing, it influences human wellbeing when unhappy people underestimate either their capacities or their access.<sup>16</sup>

Lars-Petter Pedersen takes a different tack. He considers human wellbeing to be "what is constitutive of being a human being, [such that] 'more well-being' means a higher quality, or success, of living up to the standard of what it is to be human. Conversely terms like dehumanization, depravation and degrading regarding morality and humanity are terms that describe a loss of the quality or success of living up to mentioned standard."<sup>17</sup> Pedersen's notion of human wellbeing coheres with my earlier claim that wellbeing and illbeing are ethical terms. He notes that "Kant writes that whatever diminishes the hindrances to an activity is a furthering of this activity itself, meaning that hindering those [who] harm others promote[s] the well-being of the same individuals."<sup>18</sup>

While surgeries or medical treatments are likely to cure diseases, human wellbeing arises less from curative or preventive substances meant to compensate deficits and more from concerted efforts that develop over time, enabling participants to build capacity and affirm access. I prefer capacities to capabilities, since most of us have the capacity to learn and adopt skillsets that exceed our current capabilities. Teamwork and concerted actions, rather than cozy environments, engender wellbeing. By contrast, human illbeing arises when arbitrary gatekeepers block our access, unfair wages prevent us from gaining access and developing our capacities, or poor training delimits our capacities. Of course, these conditions need not be permanent, but they certainly deflate human wellbeing, making the whole affair an even greater struggle. In this context, lead poisoning, poor diets, insufficient environmental resources, and air pollution are gatekeepers that inevitably hinder human wellbeing.

Simply put, those who have capacities but lack access suffer human illbeing, while those who have access, though insufficient capacities, also suffer human illbeing. What I have in mind is the sense of forbearance one feels when one earns a degree in a particular field (capacity) but cannot find a desirable job (inaccessibility), requiring one to switch gears. By contrast, when one finally takes a job that

one never actually planned for, human wellbeing improves as one develops skills and exercises talents one didn't even realize one had. As this paper argues, human wellbeing arises primarily from collective activities that generate additional life tools.

What interests me most about human wellbeing is the way actions originally meant as healing acts incidentally facilitate survival skills, fringe-benefits that Kevin Melchionne terms the “valuable compensatory role” of everyday aesthetic practices.<sup>19</sup> This rarely goes the other way around: one's acquiring survival skills doesn't necessarily foster wellbeing. For example, being an expert marksman lacks a “compensatory role” since superior shooting skills don't necessarily assuage whatever fears/concerns drive people to acquire self-protection in the first place. I imagine, however, that those who envision with others develop a sense of belonging. Those who engage in teamwork earn trust. Those who see goals through to completion learn endurance. Those who know how to modify/moderate goals gain balance. Those who treat problems as opportunities for solutions discover resilience. Those who develop confidence achieve wellbeing. The 42 questions comprising the “Psychological Wellbeing” survey confirm the significance of such skillsets.<sup>20</sup>

This notion of wellbeing applies equally well to nonhuman species, such that droughts, floods, invasive species, and habitat loss either diminish capacities or curb access, and thus prompt illbeing. Just as human wellbeing, which since ancient times has meant flourishing (Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia*) joins capacities to access, environmental wellbeing joins capacities to access. That is, an environment's access depends upon myriad species, each determined to thrive (eat, play, engage socially, reproduce, and mature), while its capacities comprise diverse species' abilities to survive in the face of habitat loss, global warming, predators, air/water pollution, non-natives, and manmade traps, whether ghost nets, micro-plastics, synthetic hormones, and even reflective buildings, as we learned when Flaco the NYC Zoo owl escaped.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, insufficient rain, sunlight, clean air, or healthy soil, as well as the presence of thriving nonnatives, conspire to hinder access to habitation, further engendering environmental illbeing for species that can't adapt.

For environmental wellbeing to be a meaningful bioindicator, it must convey wellbeing from the environment's perspective, not from that of human beings inhabiting the environment. So long as human beings are charged with creating the metrics indicative of

environmental wellbeing, there's a paradox (some might call it a bias). With respect to a forest's wellbeing, should we focus on its plant biodiversity, soil quality, capacity to fend off marauding insects, richness and diversity of inhabitants, abundance of young trees surviving or the amount of rainwater it capably absorbs? I'm sure there are many more variables from which to pick. Since human beings are the ones measuring the forest's environmental wellbeing, human beings no doubt intervene on its assessment. Luckily, scientists are continuously refining the appropriate metrics for measuring environmental wellbeing so as to predict the onset of environmental illbeing. Even so, assessing environmental wellbeing requires us to start somewhere.

Just as doctors use temperature, blood pressure, blood tests and MRIs to detect human illbeing, which can be physical (symptoms, sleep disorders, chronic illnesses, or congenital diseases) and/or mental (distractions, obsessions, lethargy, fears, anxiety, or anti-social behaviors), scientists use various tools to gauge environmental wellbeing (entropy, ecosystem functioning, soil fertility/organic life, biodiversity, stabilization, temperature, habitat/food, and sustainability/growth). As already noted, scientists, rather than nature lovers, are tasked with evaluating metrics indicative of environmental wellbeing. Even so, I imagine nature lovers appreciating the concept of environmental wellbeing, even if they find healthy environments lacking in aesthetic appeal. Nature lovers may be astonished to learn that some of their aesthetic preferences reflect environmental illbeing. Those who value healthy environments that incidentally boost human wellbeing might become sufficiently convinced to alter their aesthetic preferences. Absent awareness of environmental wellbeing, nature lovers are at risk of being deceived by their aesthetic preferences.

#### HOW HUMAN WELLBEING DOVETAILS WITH ENVIRONMENTAL WELLBEING

Just as we have distinct notions of human wellbeing and its inverse human illbeing, we have distinct notions of environmental wellbeing and its inverse environmental illbeing. Such terms proffer useful concepts for conveying environmental stability and degradation. As we shall see, environmental wellbeing and environmental illbeing effectively capture the spectrum (from good to poor) of ecosystem functioning, a term that has been in use for five decades.<sup>22</sup> Thus, environmental wellbeing and environmental illbeing proffer ethical counterparts for people unfamiliar with the underlying scientific

notion of ecosystem functioning. Moreover, scientists such as Shahid Naeem consider human wellbeing dependent on biodiversity,<sup>23</sup> a metric with one name, though multiple underlying formulas. Since scientists use biodiversity to *approximate* ecosystem functioning, I consider “biodiverse beauty” shorthand for environmental wellbeing.<sup>24</sup> Not only are there numerous competing methods for computing/assessing/evaluating biodiversity, but there are additional worries that the notion of biodiversity itself, especially when applied to conservation, is tainted by human prejudice.<sup>25</sup> Since both human wellbeing and ecosystem functioning depend on biodiversity, which also serves as a bio-indicator for environmental wellbeing,<sup>26</sup> it behooves scientists to standardize its measurement.

Despite the controversies regarding how best to measure biodiversity, the relationships between biodiversity and human wellbeing<sup>27</sup> or biodiversity and ecosystem functioning<sup>28</sup> are widely accepted, so linking human wellbeing to environmental wellbeing, as Naeem has done for over a decade now, makes sense. Scientists have since shown that biodiversity improves several other features, including seed dispersal, carrion removal, water quality, stream respiration, pollination, regeneration, carbon cycling, soil erosion, among others.<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, the colloquial meaning of environmental wellbeing is “environmental health”. A casual internet search for “environmental wellbeing” uncovers a definition that addresses the relationship between human beings and their environment, such that environmental wellbeing is associated with some compatibility between individual human beings and their environment.<sup>30</sup> In this case, environmental wellbeing means that the environment elicits positive feelings in humans, which is not at all the notion of environmental wellbeing I aim to develop here. In fact, I worry that people experience this notion of environmental wellbeing, even when their environment truly suffers illbeing. For example, people tend to admire well-manicured front yards that fail to provide habitat for more than a handful of species (lacks biodiversity) and formal gardens that suffer sky-high entropies (poor ecosystem functioning), leaving people no good reason to alter their aesthetic preferences in light of such environments’ illbeing.<sup>31</sup> Suffice it to say that environmental wellbeing has little to do with human beings, other than the role human beings play in either causing or preventing illbeing.

Nothing could be further from the notion of environmental wellbeing I aim to develop here than a notion of environmental wellbeing tied to human beings' "feelings," elicited by their environments. I am rather interested in assessing environmental wellbeing independent of its human inhabitants' aesthetic preferences. When it comes to aesthetics, human beings tend to favor landscapes such as manicured lawns, monoculture farms, and formal gardens, all of which are lacking in biodiversity and high in entropy, and thus suffer environmental illbeing.

Moreover, the behavior of most invasive species, including human beings, suggests nonnatives care more about their own survival than they do environmental wellbeing. Of course, my attributing "care" to nonhuman species invites charges of "anthropomorphism," which necessitates a defense. Although I later defend my attributing care to nonhuman species, it goes without saying that ethical views that consider care a uniquely human attribute are anthropocentric. Such views rely on human beings to do the caring, which puts the rest of nature at the mercy of an invasive species primarily concerned with its own interests. I rather aim to develop an ethical view that recognizes the breadth of inter- and intra-species care,<sup>32</sup> and doesn't designate human beings the care-givers and nonhuman species the cared-fors. For example, horses have been known to save riders' lives, while children sometimes attend to parents.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ENVIRONMENTAL WELLBEING

One question I'm routinely asked is why I treat environmental justice as prior to social justice. My critics believe I have this backwards. They argue that social justice, which aims to tackle a host of injustices such as racism, sexism, poverty, xenophobia, ageism, ableism, and speciesism, ought to be prior to environmental justice. The gist of their argument is that we ought to tackle social justice first, since this affects everybody. If we could resolve this, fewer injustices would prevail, enabling people to lead more productive lives, thus benefiting society as a whole. Since there is a definite correlation between unemployment and crime in the US, I wholeheartedly get their point. No doubt, society benefits when people's lives are flourishing. And of course, I also want this. Where we differ is how we frame "leading more productive lives" or what it takes to promote wellbeing. This is not to say that social justice matters less than environmental justice.



As I've argued elsewhere regarding climate and hydrological justice,<sup>33</sup> solving hydrological justice mitigates against climate change and thus contributes to climate justice. Should climate change disappear, hydrological issues would remain. Similarly, reducing environmental justice goes a long way towards boosting social justice, whereas boosting social justice leaves environmental issues. Thus, my logic that environmental justice is prior reflects the fact that addressing environmental injustices inevitably diminishes social injustices, while addressing social injustices leaves environmental injustices intact.

What do I have in mind here? In the US, it's well-documented that 30% of US homes still have lead paint, which interferes with children's brain development, leading to cognitive deficits and behavioral problems. To my lights, treating this problem as exemplary of environmental injustice places the burden on home owners to fix the problem, which should improve productivity. Even though poor people are more at risk of lead poisoning, focusing primarily on poverty won't eliminate their health risks, whereas making it a law that homeowners replace lead pipes or encapsulate lead paint increases inhabitants' odds of overcoming poverty. Thus, reducing environmental injustices goes a long way towards alleviating social injustices.

Hence, addressing environmental injustices in order to boost environmental wellbeing goes a long way toward showing respect and dignity for all living beings, human and nonhuman alike. While some might opt to focus exclusively on environmental wellbeing, effectively erasing the notion of human wellbeing; preserving distinct terms is invaluable, since human wellbeing's dependance on environmental wellbeing generates buy in, thus attracting ever more stakeholders ready to change their environmentally-unfriendly lifestyles.

Moreover, environmental wellbeing boosts security on the national level, not just on a personal level. Nations where citizens report the highest human wellbeing typically have the lowest crime rates, and vice versa. Not surprisingly, being a victim of a crime or knowing crime victims also increases one's sense of insecurity, which lowers one's subjective wellbeing.<sup>34</sup> Despite falling crime rates and booming global economies, communities across the world are experiencing ever more environmental degradation, planetary resource exploitation, and senseless online hate crimes, which leaves people feeling increasingly vulnerable. That environmental injustices are

both the leading cause of and outcomes of human illbeing suggest yet another reason to focus on environmental wellbeing.

Since this is an environmental wellbeing paper, one might ask why human wellbeing matters, other than to attract more human stakeholders. My having spent decades working with artists on art exhibitions focused on ecological issues has greatly influenced my philosophical thinking here. Most artists blame human illbeing for humans' lack of environmental awareness/effort/care. Some eco-artists thus opt to boost human wellbeing as the first step toward improving environmental wellbeing. Were every type of institution (businesses, museums, communities, universities, hospitals, law enforcement agencies, first responders, or prisons) focused on targeting human wellbeing as a basic right owed to their constituents, whether employees/clients, workers/visitors, politicians/citizens, teachers/students, health-care professionals/patients, or guards/inmates respectively, there would be fewer environmental injustices, and thus more social justice.

Finally, social justice movements risk engendering backlashes from territorial "in-groups" who distort evidence to frame legitimate rights as unjustifiable, thus casting doubt on critics' complaints, grievances, and needs. For example, US politicians have been known to deny housing, food, or medical assistance to people whom they claim could easily purchase such items, if only they worked as hard as the rest of the electorate. By contrast, politicians are less likely to deny assistance to constituents whose diminished wellbeing reflects their lack of access and/or limited capacities. A case in point is the US State of Massachusetts which treats shelter as a right for families and pregnant women. While environmental justice's initial impulse is meant to boost human wellbeing, the ultimate outcome is social justice, so long as shelters furnish families stability.

#### THE MOVE FROM CARE ETHICS TO CARE AESTHETICS

Forty years ago, Nel Noddings introduced "care as feminine ethic" as a potential alternative to abstract notions like justice and rights. Ever since, "care" has been a serious topic in the philosophical literature. Historically, the existence of legally-protected rights has minimally ensured the equitable distribution of justice. At least, rights can be defined and ratified. However, two questions remain: defined by and ratified by whom and for whom? None of us gets to choose our "rights." They are either "inalienable" (endowed by our Creator), manmade (e.g. defined by UN treaty signatories), or

particular (specified by local/national laws). For example, access to water, which sounds like a basic right, wasn't a "stand-alone right" until 2010, some 62 years after the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These days, clean water is only a right for human beings, not for other living beings, beyond those involved in agriculture whose wellbeing depends on water. Rights are meant to be distributed equally, yet standards of care are comparatively inequitable. Even a highly-respected care-giver could seem disrespectful, neglectful and/or controlling of others.<sup>35</sup>

Given that "standards of care" vary dramatically person to person, care proves no more concrete a notion than justice or rights. Moreover, care ethics is "top down," which makes one wonder who cares for the care-givers, whether doctors, coaches, parents, teachers, shepherds, or farmers. Unlike care ethics, whose cared-fors are typically those perceived of as in obvious need of care such as children, the infirm, patients, the vulnerable, the needy, etc., I consider every creature to a care-giver to every kind of creature. Every living being, whether a tree, a chicken, or a parent both requires and furnishes care.

Noddings initially conceived of the care-giver/cared-for relationship as exemplary of the *ethics* of caring. Alternatively, I value this relationship's aesthetic dimension, since each contributes to the other's well-being in *measurable* ways.<sup>36</sup> Care-givers either ameliorate or diminish cared-fors' wellbeing, and vice versa. That is, caring relationships either boost or deform one's wellbeing. I thus propose replacing care ethics with care aesthetics, since the latter offers a measurable alternative to care ethic's variable standards.

My notion of care aesthetics differs from that of Yuriko Saito who frames "aesthetic expressions of care," whether environmental artists' actions, designed objects or social relationships, as ethical relationships similar in scope to Noddings'. Regarding caring for others, Saito writes, "I have to be sensitive to the particular circumstance and her individuality so that I can be nimble in deciding how to care for her. What would be best for me if I were her may not suit her best."<sup>37</sup> Although Saito's care-giver aims to do the right thing, her view fails to assess whether care-givers' efforts actually benefit cared-fors. With my view, one can't claim to be practicing care aesthetics unless the metrics validate the claims. People either self-identify as flourishing or not, so if they're suffering illbeing, corrections are in order. In contrast to Noddings' suggestion that cared-fors

“look for signs that our caring has been received,”<sup>38</sup> I propose assessing wellbeing to determine whether “our caring has been received.”

According to Pedersen’s interpretation of Kant, the “care-giver/cared-for relationship” that is central to care ethics violates Kant’s notion of autocratic agency. As Pedersen points out, “The central point of well-being constituted by the categorical imperative is to be self-legislating, meaning that this is something only the individual can do for oneself. This means that, for instance, paternalism for the sake of the well-being of others becomes a practical contradiction; it undermines a central property of what wellbeing is, namely autocratic agency.”<sup>39</sup>

With ethical caring, the duty to care risks incentivizing and/or prolonging care relationships. By contrast, care aesthetics’ focus on wellbeing, rather than the act of caring itself, delimits the duty to care to that which is necessary to stabilize the cared-for’s wellbeing. In keeping with Kant’s duty of self-preservation, care aesthetics prioritizes the care-giver’s wellbeing, though not at the expense of the cared-for, thus preserving the care-giver’s autocratic agency. All creatures toggle between being care-givers (of course, infants are the exception) and cared-fors, so every creature is a care-giver whose self-preservation matters.

When it comes to caring for the environment, I worry that care ethics’ focus on cared-fors’ needs paves the way for corporations to justify rainforest destruction in ethical terms. For example, palm-oil corporations who claim to be caring for “citizens eager to work” are poised to ethically justify ecologically-detrimental, monocultural palm-oil plantations by pointing to their having created local jobs to process, manufacture, and sell the 70% of personal care products made from palm oil (such as soap, shampoos, lotions and make-up) to consumers, whom they also deem cared-fors.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, suppliers and purchasers practicing care aesthetics must reflect on the measurable environmental impact of their every action.<sup>41</sup>

With care aesthetics, care-givers include every single inhabitant (both flora and fauna) of a particular environment. Rather than merely boosting human wellbeing, care aesthetics grounds human decisions in ecosystem functioning, thus maximizing the flourishing of all creatures. Care aesthetics evaluates care-givers’ success at preventing environmental illbeing, which hinders human illbeing. For example, the razing of rainforests may generate mining and

agricultural jobs and thus local income, but so long as rainforest destruction destroys ecosystem functioning, environmental illbeing is aggravated, which diminishes human wellbeing. Since human-made environmental illbeing puts human lives in jeopardy, human beings have a duty to ensure environmental wellbeing. Given human beings' duty to self-preservation, preventing environmental illbeing is the most ethical thing human beings can do.

#### ADDING HYDROLOGICAL JUSTICE TO BIODIVERSE BEAUTY AND CARE AESTHETICS

To stabilize environmental wellbeing, and thus boost human wellbeing, I propose combining three distinct approaches, rather than one over-arching principle: 1) biodiverse beauty, which approximates ecosystem functioning, and thus reflects "true" beauty,<sup>42</sup> 2) care aesthetics, which ensures the wellbeing of humans and environments alike,<sup>43</sup> and 3) hydrological justice, which treats water as a shared resource, thus obligating all of its users to share in its protection.<sup>44</sup> Grounded in the principles of transparency and kinship, hydrological justice is comparative and normative like social justice.

Elsewhere, I've argued that the primary reason UNFCCC treaties such as "The Paris Agreement" have not worked is that they task locals with global burdens. To be successful, both the burdens and targets must be local.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, climate justice is typically modelled on global justice, which favors distributive justice, such that wealthier nations supplement poorer countries' expenses related to risk management. However, global justice is derived from social justice, which proves useful for administering duties, commitments, and responsibilities owed other human beings, yet its focus on human relationships rather than the environment effectively disassociates treaty signatories from the air, land, and water their efforts are meant to protect.

By contrast, climate justice ought to be modelled on global environmental justice, which administers the duties, commitments, and responsibilities that human beings owe their environments, which is home to human and nonhuman actors alike. The combination of biodiverse beauty, care aesthetics, and hydrological justice commits parties (inhabitants, care-givers, and water users, respectively) to local targets in ways that shared goals to reduce CO2 emissions have yet to achieve.

Attributing flourishing to the environment requires that we accord “agency” to the environment’s myriad members’ capacity to flourish as they have for eons, independent of human notions of “will,” intentionality, or introspection (planning, etc.). By flourish, I have in mind environmentally-specific attributes and qualities that have evolved over time. I earlier attributed a “lack of care” to *invasive* species, including human beings, whose ability to crowd out/overtake native species warrants their negative reputations. While the word “care” is rarely attributed to nonhuman species, scientists do attribute altruism to species. Of course, some scientists frame altruism as self-interested since altruism toward kin incidentally increases a species’ chance for survival, reproduction, and thus proliferation.<sup>46</sup> In the context of this paper, nonhuman species’ altruistic acts, however self-interested, exemplify care. That is, altruistic acts are characteristic of care, since they’re directed toward something, whether some kin, an object of value, something appreciated, or victims in need of protection.

One could say that the actions nonhuman species take, and the choices they make, indicate their preferences/interests/focus, in other words, what they “care about.” As noted above, species flourish when they are not denied access and have the capacity to eat, play, reproduce, engage socially, and mature. When access is limited, the lucky ones survive despite habitat loss, global warming, predators, air/water pollution, invasive species, and manmade traps, whether ghost nets, micro-plastics, synthetic hormones, and even reflective buildings. So long as an environment’s inhabitants are entangled, that is, lives are interdependent; there’s a balance that naturally constrains growth limits, which is effectively ecosystem functioning. Absent a robust concept of environmental wellbeing, human beings cannot take seriously their dual roles as inhabitants of a particular environment and protectors/destroyers of their habitat.

Recognizing environmental wellbeing as on par with human wellbeing is not so easy. For one, environmental wellbeing is collective (on the scale of an environment or ecosystem), whereas human wellbeing appears singular, though as I stressed above human wellbeing is typically the result of collective activities. Environmental wellbeing is linked to a particular habitat, whose scale and boundaries (an ocean, an island, a plateau, or an inlet) are demarcated by human inhabitants, who additionally develop the metrics used to assess ecosystem functioning.

Were human beings to become extinct, I imagine most species would thrive, though perhaps domesticated animals and plants, especially annuals, would follow suit. Until then, the environmental benefits derived from biodiversity, “living water,”<sup>47</sup> renewable energies, energy-efficient machines, factories and power plants, zero fertilizers, zero pesticides, less noise, zero food waste, and clean air prove undeniable.

#### MOVING FROM THE “CARE IMPERATIVE” TO THE “PROTECT IMPERATIVE”

Although my version of care aesthetics, whose focus is wellbeing, addresses the wellbeing of care-giver and cared-for alike, I worry that care’s inherently retrospective nature requires care-givers to play “catch up.” Even Noddings remarked, “Caring is largely reactive and responsive.”<sup>48</sup> That is, human and nonhuman species tend to care for *beings in need*. Moreover, human beings often ignore problems until full-blown issues arise. By contrast, protection is proactive.

Although care ethics’ originators grounded their approach in Kant’s notion of duty,<sup>49</sup> they failed to admit that despite the obligatory status of “ethical caring,” the “care imperative” is genuinely at risk of being enacted too late to make a difference. Rather than awaiting actual cared-fors (victims in need of care), care aesthetics prompts care-givers to assess whether their actions risk hindering environmental wellbeing in order to choose actions that prevent environmental illbeing. As noted above, care aesthetics prioritizes ecosystem functioning, which protects environmental wellbeing, and ultimately promotes human wellbeing.

Even if (as Pedersen claims), Kant would have rejected “ethical caring” as a violation of autocratic agency, he considered “[h]indering the harming of others an obligation, as we could never will the degradation of the function of supersensible nature.”<sup>50</sup> For Kant, supersensible means that reason and sensibility are asymmetrically intertwined.<sup>51</sup> When applied to the environment, we not only have an obligation to hinder human actions that harm the environment, but we must not will nature’s degradation, so anything we do to prevent environmental illbeing is consistent with Kant. As Kant observed, “When a thoughtful human being has overcome incentives to vice and is aware of having done his often bitter duty, he finds himself in a state that could well be called happiness, a state of contentment and peace of soul in which virtue is its own reward.”<sup>52</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Every living creature is vulnerable to predators, as well as to an insufficient amount of water, sunlight, clean air, habitat, food, kin etc. Since human wellbeing is linked to our environment's wellbeing, Kant's negative duties forbid us from ignoring environmental illbeing, since doing so is not only contrary to the ends of our nature, but it demonstrates a lack of moral self-preservation, a kind of moral failure.<sup>53</sup> Rather than adopt the reactionary "care imperative," we have a *perfect* duty to adopt the proactive "protect imperative," such that we employ metrics that enable us to anticipate how our actions, values, and aesthetic preferences impact all living creatures, lest we human beings eventually go extinct. Finally, those who self-identify as ecologically-minded, yet have aesthetic preferences that engender or arise from environmental illbeing, are effectively liars, which "violates the dignity of [their] humanity."<sup>54</sup>



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