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## EXPERIENCING VALUES IN THE FLOW OF EVENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RELATIONAL VALUES

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the notion of ‘relational values’ from a phenomenological point of view. In the first place, it stresses that in order to make full sense of relational values, we need to approach them through a relational ontology that surpasses dualistic descriptions of the world structured around the subject and the object. With this aim, I then turn to *ecophenomenology*’s attempt to apprehend values from a first-person perspective embedded in the lifeworld, where our entanglement with other beings is not a theoretical construction but a palpable reality. Overall, the article’s main purpose is to show that, in our direct and raw experience, values do not appear as subjective judgments or as objective properties but as events to which we participate alongside other human and non-human beings.

### KEY WORDS

Relational values; relational ontology; ecophenomenology; Claude Romano; events; ethic of participation

## ***Introduction***

Over the last decade, the notion of ‘relational values’ has become an important topic amongst environmentalists at an interdisciplinary level. It is generally presented as a promising middle path avoiding the dead ends that a strict dichotomy between instrumental and intrinsic values lead us into. Its strong presence in the IPBES conceptual framework (Diaz et al. 2015), for example, shows that a certain consensus has been reached concerning its potential to initiate efficient environmental policies. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm to which the concept of relational value gives rise thanks to its practical relevance sometimes conceals its theoretical vagueness.

Indeed, the widely accepted definition of relational values as ‘preferences, principles and virtues associated with relationships’ (Chan et al. 2016) gives a deliberately broad understanding of a category of values designed to be mobilized by scholars or policy-makers in multiple contexts. However, one can fear that despite its attractiveness and flexibility, the concept lacks clarity and tends to obscure the subtleties of the classic intrinsic value debate. Worse, it could lead one to deny the moral progress present in recognition of an ‘objective good’ in nature (Piccolo 2017). Hence, an urgent philosophical question is how exactly the category of relational values relates to those of instrumental and intrinsic values.<sup>1</sup> Is it properly speaking a ‘third class’ of values (Chan et al.) in addition to the two others, or does it replace

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I choose to oppose *intrinsic* to *instrumental* values, as often occurs in the environmental ethics discussions, in order to stress the difference between valuing nature as an end in itself (non-instrumental value) and valuing nature as a means to fulfill human needs and preferences (natural resources, ecosystem services, aesthetic and spiritual values, etc.). However, as G. E. Moore has established in his classic writings, intrinsic values are properly contrasted with *extrinsic* or *derivative* values, of which instrumental values are only a subcategory. Therefore, referring to intrinsic values as an equivalent of non-instrumental values is a short-cut that lacks precision. As Donald S. Maier (2012: 14-22) has shown through his cartography of the categories of values that we attribute to biodiversity, a proper definition of these concepts requires the consideration of multiple levels of thought in both normative ethics and meta-ethics. However, engaging in the analysis of these subtleties would distract us from the purpose of this paper. Thus, the rather simplified manner in which I mobilize and contrast the concepts of intrinsic and instrumental values is a deliberate choice that, I believe, doesn’t affect my central propositions about relational values and why they are to be approached from a phenomenological perspective.

them? In other words: do relational values fit into classical theories of environmental ethics or do they introduce a new paradigm?

Using a phenomenological approach that pays attention to the very experience of valuing, I will argue here for the second alternative. The notion of relational value invites us to understand valuing as a dynamic process involving numerous human and non-human participants, rather than as a static act of value attribution involving a subject and an object. Hence, ultimately, the reason why the notion of relational values constitutes a theoretical breakthrough is that, by assimilating values to *relations* rather than to the preferences of a subject or the properties of an object, relational values allow us to rise above the residual forms of dualism that still impregnate environmental philosophy. Building on this line of argumentation, I will tend to show, more generally, that *ecophenomenology* offers a relevant method and framework to give relational values a solid philosophical grounding.

In the first section, I start by distinguishing a pragmatic and an ontological approach to relational values. The pragmatic approach uses relational values as a convenient and flexible concept that captures, in concrete contexts, the multiple reasons people have to care for their environment. Focusing uniquely on this practical level, however, doesn't enable us to understand how exactly the concept of relational value contributes to the renewal of debates concerning the valuing of nature. This is why I argue that an ontological approach is needed to provide a proper explanation of what relational values really are. I then stress that in order for it to make sense, the concept of relational value has to be grounded on a relational worldview in which classical theories of value, mobilizing concepts such as 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental', lose their relevance. In the second section, I turn towards ecophenomenology to explore this relational worldview from a first-person perspective and consider how value can *emanate* from relationships. Finally, building on the work of the contemporary French phenomenologist Claude Romano, I defend the idea that relational values are most adequately understood as forms of 'events' in which we *participate* alongside other human and non-human beings.

## **1. Relational Values: Distinguishing the Pragmatist and the Ontological Approaches**

It seems that many scholars, as a consequence of their attachment to moral pluralism, elude the question of the compatibility of relational values with other common categories of values. Whether this is deliberate or not, the desire to display a broad palette of axiological and normative concepts approachable from multiple worldviews often prevails over the need for coherence within this palette. Barbara Muraca (2011, 2016), however, has influentially defended the idea that the introduction of relational values in environmental ethics offers a ‘new matrix’ through which we ought to approach the moral significance of non-human beings. So, should we view relational values primarily as a convenient and adaptable tool for environmental policy-makers or as a cornerstone of a theoretical shift within environmental ethics? The relative haziness resulting from this question can be tackled, I propose, by introducing a clear distinction between the *pragmatist* and the *ontological* approaches to relational values.

### **The Pragmatist Approach**

The pragmatists’ central preoccupation is to promote efficient environmental policies that resonate accurately with the complex way people relate to nature. At this practical level, pragmatists observe that the choice between protecting the environment either for humans’ sake or for its own is too narrow. The entanglement of nature with culture calls on us to search for a subtler understanding of the reasons we care for the non-human entities with which we cohabit the earth. From this perspective, pragmatists call for the recognition of an intermediate and flexible category of values able to make sense of empirical observations concerning environmental activism. The narratives of individuals and communities engaged in nature protection, they claim, express a wide range of values that overflow the strict categories of instrumental and intrinsic values.

The research conducted by Arias-Arévalo *et al.* (2017) on the valuation of ecosystems along the Otún River in Colombia offers a clear illustration of how pragmatists tend to use the concept of relational values. Building on empirical data collected within rural and urban populations<sup>2</sup>, the authors suggest grouping various environmental motivations under the category of ‘relational values’, defined as ‘the importance attributed to meaningful relations and responsibilities between humans and between humans and nature’ (Arias-Arévalo *et al.* 2017). Sense of place, cultural heritage, and spiritual or aesthetic experiences, are examples amongst many others of these ‘meaningful relations’. Of course, economic considerations and questions of biospheric integrity also come into the account, but they are integrated into complex narratives allowing values of different nature and origin to cohabit. The great benefit of this pluralist approach, as the authors show, appears at the level of policy-making. By focusing on relational values, environmental managers are invited to look beyond the conflicting opposition between economic and moral valuations of ecosystems, which tend to turn them into either economic resources or sanctuaries. Local populations are no longer seen as destructive forces. Quite the contrary, the intimate knowledge they have of their land is valued as a strong lever for efficient bottom-up environmental actions.<sup>3</sup>

However, when considering this broad pragmatist definition of relational values, we can reasonably doubt that the concept brings much clarification to the description of the way people relate to their environment. The risk of it being simply a fashionable way of speaking about categories of values that have been recognized for a long time in conservation biology and environmental ethics is not negligible. A quick look into Bryan Norton’s work confirms this.

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<sup>2</sup> Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, this research aims to capture and categorize the many ways in which rural and urban populations, living in proximity to ecosystems of the Otún River, relate to them and justify their importance. Arias-Arévalo *et al.* argue that opposing economic opportunities on one side to moral duties on the other is somewhat artificial. The results of their study show that most of the answers people give to justify the importance of the river in their lives have to do with the multidimensional relationships they forge with the river and with the living beings inhabiting its watershed.

<sup>3</sup> Many empirical studies, trying to capture people’s complex motivations to engage in nature conservation and to promote democratic and inclusive environmental policy tools, have made use of the notion of relational values. Good examples are Allen *et al.* 2018; Sheremata 2018 ; Skubel *et al.* 2019; Uehara *et al.* 2020.

As a central figure of pragmatism in environmental ethics, Norton has, since the 1980s, been exposing the deficiencies of the intrinsic-instrumental dichotomy, which he thinks are due to its excessively theoretical nature.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, his *adaptive management* already anticipates the need to elaborate bottom-up environmental policies by focusing on the concrete relations people have with their environment, rather than on abstract principles (Norton 2005).

Therefore, relational values are probably not an indispensable conceptual tool for pragmatists willing to make sense of ways of valuing our environment that are neither strictly economic nor strictly moral.<sup>5</sup> Across environmental ethics and conservation debates, different methods and terminologies have been employed to describe and to name the ‘third class’ of values revealing nature as neither a pure means nor a pure end. Thus, unless we manage to give a more precise definition of relational values, there is no reason to believe this concept has any greater theoretical and practical relevance. In fact, as Neuteleers (2020) has noted, its success might primarily be due to its vagueness. Anyone can use it and link his or her research to it in one way or another. In many cases, enthusiasm for relational values seems to have no stronger grounding than sympathy for moral pluralism. However, as Neuteleers (2020) has also observed, this practical and policy-oriented debate around relational values has to be distinguished from the philosophical debate. The *pragmatist* approach that tends to consider relational values as a convenient label for referring to all sorts of non-intrinsic and non-

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<sup>4</sup> Through Norton’s ‘catalog of sustainability values’ (community-procedural values; economic values; risk-avoidance values and community-identity values), he has shown himself to be well aware of the existence of values perfectly comparable to what scholars now call relational values and has described with acuity the plural ways communities justify their environmental actions (Norton 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Other concepts have been used to achieve the same goal. Some scholars, in fact, have simply chosen to widen the instrumental value category so to include values such as aesthetic or spiritual ones, as proposed by the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* (2005). Others however, at odds with what they interpret as an economicist worldview, have focussed on how nature participates in a meaningful life. The idea that non-human entities have ‘eidaimonic value’ for instance - i.e. that they are part of what is required to lead a good life - is quite widespread (Pritchard *et al.* 2019).

economic values is different from an *ontological* approach that aims to define positively what relational values really are. As I will now argue, through this second approach the notion of relational values has the potential to be truly groundbreaking. To see how, we need to consider relational values not as a ‘third class’ in addition to the others, but as a way of redefining what the very act of valuing means in the context of a relational ontology.

### **The Ontological Approach**

The idea that we should ground environmental ethics in an ecological worldview which would reintegrate humans into the biosphere is far from new. In fact, such a strategy is at the heart of the Leopoldian ecocentric tradition. As Baird J. Callicott (1986) argues, ecological science, which reveals the constitutive interactions in which living beings are involved, leads us to adopt a postmodern conceptual framework in which relations are ontologically prior to the entities being related. This metaphysical postulate implies the recognition of an important porosity in the boundary between self and others. Thus, altruistic behaviours towards non-human entities are rationally justified because we share with them a common history and fate.

On the basis of this general argument, proponents of ecocentrism invite us to grasp how the adoption of a relational ontology leads to the recognition of intrinsic value in nature. Nevertheless, one can ask oneself if the use of the ‘intrinsic value’ concept in this relational framework is not contradictory. Indeed, on the one hand, at the ontological level, attention is shifted from objects and individuals to the dynamics of ecosystems and the interdependence of all living beings. On the other hand, at the ethical level, the maintaining of the idea that natural entities should be valued as ends in themselves on the basis of their intrinsic qualities seems to be taking us back to a very classical way of thinking about value, according to which it inheres in objects and may be observed therein by human subjects (Morito, 2003).

The problem can be understood through a logical analysis. When speaking of intrinsic value as something *possessed by* or *attributed to* someone or something, the subject-object structure of thought is implicitly present in the background : ‘asking whether nature possesses an intrinsic

value, whether as a result of subjective evaluation or objective properties, approaches the issue from the wrong metaphysical framework, namely the modernist view that the world consists of subjects, objects and their properties' (Bannon, 2016 : 54). As Val Plumwood (2002) has also argued from her dialogical ecofeminist perspective, a form of neo-Cartesianism is at work here. Instead of discussing where to place the frontier between instrumental and intrinsic value bearers, maybe we should be questioning the frontier itself.

To summarize the argument, it seems that in the context of a relational ontology, a new vocabulary to speak about values is needed to avoid that the dualism we evacuate through the front door sneaks back in through a side entrance. This is precisely where the concept of relational value can help us and where it comes to possess a deep ontological meaning. The relational value of a natural entity is not simply the value that one ascribes to the relationship one has with it. More fundamentally, it is the value that *emanates* from the relationship itself (Muraca 2011, 2016). From this perspective, the existence of value depends neither strictly on the object being evaluated nor on the subject making the evaluation. This is because in a relational ontology, subjects and objects are realities of a second order that can be pictured as momentary knots in dynamic webs of relations. Values, it follows, ontologically *precede* the constitution of subjects and objects, not the opposite. As Muraca (2011: 382) puts it:

The place of value is the relational region in which both subject and object originate.

The subjective moment of looking at something and the construction of the object as an object, which is looked at, arise at the same time from an undifferentiated field of value-awareness, in which there is not yet a distinct valuer and *some-thing* valued.

So, as we will see presently, the great theoretical advantage of the concept of relational values, understood in its ontological sense, is that it offers a way to cut short the difficult epistemological debate concerning the subjective or objective nature of values.<sup>6</sup> Overall, it

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<sup>6</sup> Environmental philosophers, keen to give a solid grounding to the notion of intrinsic value, have been arguing whether it originates in the objective characteristics of the evaluated entities

appears that the objectivism *versus* subjectivism debate takes the form of a dilemma where one has to choose the lesser evil: choosing objectivism at the cost of claiming that values exist *independently* of human evaluators; or choosing subjectivism at the cost of accepting relativism. Of course, the most convincing answers seek out a middle path. Holmes Rolston III and J. Baird Callicott, for example, have both proposed ingenious theories of intrinsic value that make room for our contrasted philosophical intuitions. Rolston, sticking as close as possible to the idea that intrinsic value is objectively part of the reality we apprehend, has suggested considering it as a type of *property* of natural entities that, as such, is not a production of a human mind : ‘To say that *n* is valuable means that *n* is able to be valued, if and when human valuers, *H*'s, come along, but *n* has these properties whether or not humans arrive’(Rolston 1994:14).<sup>7</sup> However, Rolston stresses that the presence of intrinsic value in a natural entity is only *potential* until a conscious being *actualises* this value through a consciousness act. Valuing is like pointing a light at values hidden in the dark but waiting to come to light.

Callicott’s theory of intrinsic value resonates with Rolston’s in many respects, only he uses a subjectivist framework inspired by Hume.<sup>8</sup> The *source* of value, he tells us, lies in the evaluating subject, but it doesn’t imply that values can be reduced to personal preferences or cultural representations. That is because valuing is not an ‘auto-referential’ activity. In most cases, the *locus* of value is different from its source (Callicott 1985). As Callicott explains,

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or in the subjective judgment of human evaluators. To put the question differently: when I’m intrinsically valuing a natural being, is it because it really *has* a special axiological property in the same sense that it has physical properties like size and shape, or is it because I’m *attributing* it this value on the basis of moral criteria external to it. In short, is intrinsic value in the natural world or in the eye that contemplates it?

<sup>7</sup> Rolston seems to be influenced by G.E Moore’s conception of intrinsic value, according to which the intrinsic value of an object can be considered more or less as a secondary property, i.e. a property that, like color for example, *depends* on the intrinsic characteristics of an object but that is not a direct property of the object.

<sup>8</sup> What I identify here as a Humean conception of value is primarily the will to naturalize values. In other words, it is the belief that values belong to the realm of sensibility more than to the realm of reason. In Callicott’s sociobiological approach to values, the ability to attribute value is considered a part of human nature. The ability to feel for other beings plays, in his view, an important part in the history of the evolution of human kind and of life in general.

claiming that the nature of the value I attribute to another being is purely relative, only because this value *originates* in my mind, is just as absurd as claiming that my love of a person is not really love *for* that person but for my own feelings of love. From this observation, Callicott defends a ‘truncated’ conception of intrinsic value conceding that objects have no value *in themselves* (they are not the origin of value), but most certainly have values *for themselves*, meaning that they are being valued for what they really are. The proximity with Rolston is now visible: by distinguishing the source and the locus of value, Callicott is essentially giving a subjectivist account of Rolston’s distinction between potential and actual values.

What matters here is that both authors, despite their surface disagreement on the objective or subjective nature of value, emphasize the *encounter* of the subject and object. This appears clearly when Rolston says that ‘intrinsic value in the realized sense *emerges relationally*<sup>9</sup> with the appearance of the subject-generator’ (1994: 14). Callicott pushes the thought further by drawing our attention on the *intentional* structure of the act of valuing. Valuation requires the establishment of an intentional relation with external entities. Thus, any philosophical account of the act of valuing that focuses only on internal dispositions of the subject or on external properties of the object is reductionist because it is blind to the relation itself. Consequently, Callicott has seen with lucidity the direction to take: ‘a fully consistent contemporary environmental ethic [...] requires a theory of the noninstrumental value of nature which is neither subjectivist nor objectivist’ (1985: 267).

What Callicott is calling for here is, I argue, precisely what the concept of relational value aims to accomplish when understood in its ontological sense. That is, to describe the act of valuing by focusing on the encounter of the subject and object in a region of reality where they are still entangled and have not been strictly divided by the action of language and thought. In this relational paradigm, the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values loses its

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<sup>9</sup> My emphasis

relevance and becomes secondary. What matters are not the preferences of human or the inherent axiological properties of non-humans but the reality that lies *in between* and precedes the analytical act of discriminating whatever comes to our consciousness into the realms of the internal or external.

Hence, relational value, in the ontological sense, is not just another concept in the environmental policy-maker's toolbox. It is an invitation to accomplish a paradigm shift within environmental ethics and turn our attention to a different set of cardinal questions. Rather than discussing how and why we ought to attribute value to 'other than humans' from a disembodied neutral perspective in the hope that the answer can provide a solid justification for nature protection, we need to start from our visceral intuition that nature *has* value and ask ourselves what that really means. This exploration has been the task of ecophenomenology since its appearance in the mid 1980s. And, as I will now argue, it offers a most relevant approach to relational values.

## ***2. The Experience of a Meaningful World: an Ecophenomenological Approach to Values and Valuing***

Relational values are not the values attributed to relationships *by* subjects. Nor are they the objective value that relationships have *in themselves*. More subtly, they are what emanates *from* relationships. They are layers or parts of reality where the encounter between what we later call the subject and object occurs. However, once we have described relational values at this ontological level, another question immediately arises at the epistemological level: how do we access them? If they are not properties of things, like shape or mass that we can see or measure, and if they are also not mental constructions that we can contemplate through the reflexive movement of thought, then what other possibility remains?

This is a question we must ask ourselves in order really to immerse ourselves in the relational paradigm. Ignoring this epistemological dimension is, I believe, precisely the reason why

Rolston and Callicott have not fully succeeded in taking environmental ethics beyond its dualistic analytical framework, despite their strong intuitions leading in that direction. By grounding their argumentation in the natural sciences, such as quantum physics, evolutionary biology or ecosystem science, both manage admirably to construct relational representations of reality in order to justify our moral bond to the non-human world. However, they seem to forget the fact that the *methodologies* of the natural sciences are dualistic, i.e. they apprehend the world from a third-person perspective. Indeed, science's objectivity depends on the possibility of considering its objects of study as pure exteriorities. Thus, Rolston and Callicott attempt to theorize human immersion in nature but not to grasp its concrete and practical reality. The natural world, even though described in relational terms, remains an external realm to which we can only have an indirect access.

Therefore, to recognize the full significance and relevance of relational values, we need to go beyond this epistemological limitation and approach them from a *first-person* perspective. As phenomenology invites us to do, this implies going back to 'the things themselves' and exploring our lived *experiences* of being embedded in a world of values. Adopting this aim, ecophenomenologists have been arguing that we must ultimately understand our self-destructive anti-environmental behaviour not simply as a moral crisis but as a crisis of meaning (Kohák 1987; Abram 1997; Brown and Toadvine 2003). Indeed, from our modern naturalistic perspective, 'nature' has become nothing more than inert matter distributed in an abstract space-time continuum and set in motion by a set of fundamental forces. As a consequence, we believe that *all* there is to know about the world concerns its mechanical structure. One is said to understand a phenomenon when one is able to identify and deconstruct the causal chains leading to its appearance. In such a worldview, there is no room for meaning *within* nature. Only the human mind can be its source. Like Blaise Pascal, we are left to contemplate solitarily the 'eternal silence of infinite spaces.'

Ecophenomenologists strongly oppose the idea of an inert, mute and meaningless nature and ask that we recognize that nature actively participates to the meaning we find in it. Nature has like a voice of its own with which we are in a constant dialogue at the pre-conceptual level of our bodily incarnation in the world (Maxcy, 1994). At first sight, one may fear that this is an obscure path tainted with animism. However, phenomenology contests neither the methods of natural science, nor its results. More modestly, it challenges its reductionism and tends, in consequence, to explore what is left out by naturalistic descriptions of the world. As Husserl and his successors have shown, the blind spot of Science is the *lifeworld* – i.e. the world as it appears to our senses and consciousness in raw and direct experience.<sup>10</sup>

What we can retain for the purpose of this article is that phenomenology conceives knowledge as having an important experiential dimension underneath its cognitive one. The factual world of objects that naturalism takes to be the whole of reality is only the thin layer of abstractions that we have derived from our thick relation to the world. In other words, our corporal and existential rooting in the world precedes and overflows our intellectual attempts to capture it. Building on this philosophical observation, the heart of the ecophenomenological project is to approach nature first and foremost as a concrete lived experience from which we can learn – an experience not merely of objects and facts, but also of meaning and values.

In his phenomenological discussion of the concept of objective value, where he points towards its inadequacy, Don E. Marietta has perfectly captured how the lifeworld is impregnated with values:

We make judgments of value without prior judgments of fact. When as a child I first saw a large body of water, it was not its size, not its coloration, nor the movement upon its surface which I first constituted. First came awe and excitement, even before any

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<sup>10</sup> Phenomenology opposes the *lifeworld* to the world of common sense full of models, representations and beliefs that condition our vision of it. The life world is the world we apprehend first and foremost as a sensitive reality and that we inhabit corporally as an indistinct part of it.

quantifiable aspects of other physical qualities were constituted. When I realized its size, it was awesome size. When I first grasped its deep color, it was amazingly beautiful color. When I saw the waves move upon the shore, the strongest part of the experience was feeling for which I still can find no words. (Marietta 1997:16)

Marietta's central claim in this passage is that we are wrong to treat values differently from facts as if facts had concreteness and objectivity that values don't. Both are undistinguished parts of the raw material that constitutes our lived experience. The story of this first experience of the sea reveals that our value judgments are often our most primitive way of engaging with the things and people around us. The attraction or repulsion we feel for the forms of beings we encounter in the lifeworld is immediate and doesn't need to be 'grounded' on their factual characteristics.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, contesting the claim that facts and values belong to different ontological and epistemological realms implies that the way we acquire knowledge of values is not very different from the way we acquire knowledge of facts. In both cases, it seems naïve to imagine there can be a direct and perfect *correspondence* between an object of the world and a representation in the mind. More subtly, the quality of our judgments relies on our ability to *interpret* concrete situations on the basis of an open set of subjective and intersubjective sensations and beliefs. A fact is never given to us in isolation from others. It stands in complex causal chains that we try to identify from our bodily, historically and culturally determined perspectives. In that regard at least, values are no different. We need to consider them as caught

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<sup>11</sup> This of course doesn't imply that there is no correspondence between value and factual judgments. When thinking of what makes a lake scenery "stunning" for example, I will have no difficulty to identify a set of the lake's physical assets that I particularly appreciate: the subtle shades of green and blue; the mirror effect at the water surface; a swan swimming elegantly in the morning mist. However, what appears through a phenomenological perspective is that these factual traits of the scenery are not given to me separately and prior to the emotions I feel. All stand side by side in my experience of the lake.

in the myriad of relations that constitute our lifeworld. As Marietta puts it: ‘An isolated value is like a flower pulled up by the roots’ (1997: 27).

We can now start to see how phenomenology dissolves, more so than it solves, the apparent problems raised by the objectivist *versus* subjectivist debate. It simply places value in the lifeworld rather than in the subject or the object. The ontological question of the nature of values becomes intimately connected to the epistemological question of how we access values. In other words, phenomenology shows that values need to be understood through the *experience of valuing* taking place in the lifeworld more than through the reasoning of a philosophy paper.<sup>12</sup>

One of the strong arguments in favor of this phenomenological approach to values is that, to a certain extent, we can make sense of both subjectivist and objectivist intuitions without facing major contradictions. On the one hand, we can concede to the subjectivists that valuing is indeed a *first-person* experience. Value is always value *for*, meaning that for values to emerge in the lifeworld there must be encounters involving living beings (who are ‘subjects’ of some sort). On the other hand, however, we can also concede to the objectivists that values are not mere representations produced by these beings. If values can be shared by a group of people, it is not simply because they have common beliefs, but because, in their lived experiences, these values are perfectly real and tangible since values are not a creation of our all-powerful mind but a concrete aspect of the lifeworld. In this view, if people happen to disagree on the evaluation of a situation, it is only indirectly due to their different representations and beliefs. More fundamentally, it is because they haven’t really experienced the *same* event. They haven’t related in the same way to what is taking place. To formulate this statement positively: it is

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<sup>12</sup> At the pre-conceptual level of lived experience, when I speak of my admiration for a tree in my garden for instance, what I’m referring to is not a thing or a representation of some sort but my experience of living by this tree and feeling, in that process, an aesthetic or moral bond towards it. In fact, when gazing at the tree, I’m probably not even qualifying this experience as aesthetic or moral in the first place. From a phenomenological perspective *all there is*, is a perceptual event that Merleau-Ponty (2016) would describe as the overlapping of two movements: my senses reaching towards the tree and the tree reaching back towards me.

precisely because our experiences can always somehow touch and connect with each other that we can generally agree on axiological judgments and that the possibility of universal values is not absurd.

Indeed, this is also what Marietta's childhood's story teaches us. There are many contexts in which the axiological content of an experience is evident to all who live it independently of any particular facts to which they may also pay attention. During a war, for example, the pain, ugliness, or feeling of absurdity will seem more real and definitely more relevant for those who suffer than any factual aspects of the conflict. Less dramatically, if we consider our everyday experiences, it seems that we often agree spontaneously on the gloominess or the warmth of an atmosphere before we are able to identify what exactly is guiding our judgment. From a phenomenological perspective, these shared feelings are understood in terms of shared experiences. The lifeworld is not made up of static subjects and objects but of dynamic encounters and *events* that are full of value.

### **3. *The Eventive Nature of Values***

By understanding values as embedded in the lifeworld and by approaching valuation foremost as an *in situ* experience, we start to see how phenomenology is of great help to shed light on the concept of relational values. Until now we have described relational values as occupying a space 'in between' the subject and object. What we really mean by that, of course, is metaphorical. Values are not 'things' hanging somewhere midway between the subject and the object. Rather, what we are stressing is that they belong neither to the physical realm of the object nor to the mental realm of the subject but to the lifeworld where subject and object meet. In other words, values come into existence in the concrete and direct experiences of living subjects. The indignation I feel when confronted with someone beating his dog, for example, can't be fully explained by my recognition of an objective right the dog has not to be abused or by my subjective representations of how one should treat his pet. When coming upon the sight

of the beating and when hearing the dog squeal in fear, I am thrown into the lifeworld *with* the dog and have an immediate access to his suffering. At the same time, I also experience the man's violence and frustration alongside other aspects of the incident such as the presence of other people staring at the scene. My indignation is what emanates from the set of relations that I am a part of in this situation.

Moreover, by shifting our focus from the spatial to the temporal characteristics of relational values, we have also stated that they 'precede' the constitution of the subject and object. To continue with the same example, when I come across the dog getting beaten, what I experience immediately is that *there is* an event of violence, fear and indignation. The fact that it is my indignation provoked by the dog's suffering and, ultimately, by the man's violence, is more a part of my analysis of the experience than of the experience itself. Here again, this is barely intelligible if we don't make a considerable effort to adopt a dynamic and relational worldview that questions our classical conception of space and time as an abstract box containing 'things'. Making this effort is precisely the aim of this final section, which suggests that we understand relational values as forms of events.

### **Beyond the 'Source-Location' Metaphors: Exploring the 'in Between'**

During the past decade, ecophenomenologists have tried to reframe the debates concerning nature's value by taking a step back and considering our very way of positioning ourselves in the world and of relating to other beings. With this purpose, Tom Greaves and Rupert Read (2015), have proposed a convincing 'ecological model' of values that can serve here as a starting point to explore the 'in between' space that relational values occupy and to grasp why they are closer to events than they are to things or properties of things.

Through a phenomenological enquiry Greaves and Read start by showing that classical theories of values are trapped in misleading metaphors of *location*: we ask *where* value resides

without firstly asking ourselves if this question makes any sense.<sup>13</sup> However, as they argue, we need to see the bigger picture and acknowledge that values are diffused in much larger ‘ecological fields’ constituted of countless encounters between living beings. What they call an ‘ecological field’ doesn’t designate an objective ecosystem, as studied in ecological science, but an entanglement of the lifeworlds of living being that can only be apprehended from within our own lifeworld. In this relational and dynamic perspective, the source of value ‘is not in one kind of being (nor even dependent upon specific capacities), but in encounters that take place between living beings, making up an ecological field’ and the location of value ‘is in any being that can matter to those who make up an ecological field as a whole’ (2015: 322).

What Greaves and Read are proposing here is to consider the world, not as a neutral and abstract common ground, but as the intersection of the lived experiences of the beings that *inhabit* it. They show that for values to emerge in the world, what is needed is beings capable of *openness*. That means, beings who somehow *respond* to the interactions they are involved in and whose identity, evolution and flourishing depend on the possibilities offered to them through these interactions. As Greaves and Read (2015 : 328) develop : ‘every living being that is in some way or to some degree *open* to the world has, one might say, its own world, its own set of Gibsonian “affordances”, its own capacity to find valuable.’

The ecophenomenologist Bryan E. Bannon (2013) has expressed very similar intuitions using a different terminology. In a paper calling on us to avoid the use of the intrinsic value concept and to ground non-anthropocentric environmental ethics on a hermeneutic shift in our understanding of nature, he explores what he calls a ‘place-based ethic’. ‘Place’ is not considered here as a narrowly spatial concept. It is not simply an abstract entity that *contains* a

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<sup>13</sup> They identify two main models, or sets of metaphors, that implicitly condition how we conceive values. The first is the perception-based model where values are assimilated to perceptual qualities. The second is the desire-based model where values are approached as objects of desire or of repulsion. In both cases we are inclined to focus narrowly on the source or/and on the locus of value.

set of objects. More subtly, Bannon refers to Edward S. Casey's work and defines places as 'the relational context of our experiences' (2013: 269). In the background is Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology, which insists on the *chiasmic* structure of our relation to the world.<sup>14</sup> Unlike what our modern representations suggest, we don't 'stand' in a place as clearly distinct and isolated individuals engaging in contingent relations with other beings. Place, rather, is the result of an entanglement of beings. As Bannon describes: 'bodies are "implaced", meaning they are both passively produced by their environments while at the same time they actively contribute to the constitution of the place' (2013: 269).

What is important to grasp here is that the phenomenological act of diving into the world by paying attention to our lived experience of being (in) a place, carries an ethical dimension immediately within it. Openness towards other beings, which becomes tangible in one's own inhabitation of a place, is not a neutral experience and is precisely where value resides. Bannon shows that the compassion we feel for the other, be it human or otherwise, is ultimately rooted in the overlapping of our existences. This, of course, seems to take us back to Aldo Leopold's holistic teachings and is certainly the intuition at the heart of his land ethics. The difference with classical ecocentrism, however, is that by offering a *first person* rather than an abstract scientific description of this relational ontology, ecophenomenology allows us to see the inadequacy of the intrinsic value concept and to describe value as being itself a relational *phenomenon*.

Hence, as a phenomenon, it has a temporal and dynamic dimension that can't be captured by any of the regular reifying concepts reducing values to type of 'things'. Indeed, what is visible in both the ecophenomenological contributions we have just reviewed is that

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<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'chiasm' refers to the double movement that he identifies in perception going from our senses to the world and from the world to our senses. The body, in his view, is not what separates us from the external world but, on the contrary, what unites us to it. To use one of his metaphors, it is as difficult to place the demarcation between the world and ourselves as it is to place the demarcation between the beach and the sea where they interpenetrate.

values are best understood as *events*. They are fully part of the dynamic flow of life through which, or during which, we encounter other beings as participants of this flow. What I would like to stress here is that this description of values using metaphors of movement, to supplement the static vocabulary of ‘things’ and ‘properties’, is a crucial contribution of the ecophenomenological approach to relational values. This *eventive* nature of values is, in fact, something Greaves and Read have perfectly identified: ‘Value, we have suggested, is series of endlessly ongoing and fluxing “events”. It is a process that we must play an active and embodied part in’ (2015: 335).

Of course, the idea that values have an eventive nature is not easy to apprehend because of the radicalness with which it shakes our dominant, object-centered worldview.<sup>15</sup> Instead we need a philosophy of *immanence* examining meticulously our relation to the world from within. This is precisely what Claude Romano aims to achieve through his ‘evential hermeneutics’<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> I am thankful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper for having brought to my attention what may seem to be a rather strong objection one could make to the idea of valuing as ‘eventive’. Stating that values are part of events seems to imply that the duration of a value’s existence depends of the duration of the event of which it is a part. Yet, events are one-off occurrences whereas values can endure over long periods of time. To illustrate this tension, the reviewer suggested to consider how one values his parents. Since one can generally feel that this value is always somehow present ‘in the background’ of one’s life - no matter where one is or what one does - it seems false to say that the value one recognizes or attributes to one’s parents ceases to exist whenever one is not relating with them.

I believe that the best way to reply to this objection would be to argue that it is framed in a classical modernist ontology, whereas the idea of valuing as eventive belongs to a relational ontology. As J. Baird Callicott (1999, 233) has pointed out, in a relational ontology ‘all natural properties – quantitative, qualitative and axiological – exist only potentially on the side of erstwhile objects and are actualized only upon interaction with erstwhile subjects.’ Hence, we could defend the idea that values present ‘in the background’, such as valuable relation one has with one’s parents even when one is not physically, are in a ‘potential’ state of being. This, however, is only one way of describing what has to be ultimately understood as a relational phenomenon. We could also insist on the need to adopt a non-substantial conception of the child’s and his parents’ very being. If we take seriously the idea that the child *is* his life long history of interactions with his environment, then we can argue that his relation to his parents is an important part of him that is always somehow ‘there’.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Evential’ is the translation that is generally given of Claude Romano’s neologism ‘évenementiel’. Normally in French, the adjective derived from ‘événement’ is ‘évenementiel’. However, with ‘évenementiel’ Romano wanted to shed light on the phenomenological dimension of events. In their proper evential aspect, events are more than the factual and neutral content of the world. They appear as being addressed to us and we exist through them.

that we shall now consider in this last section in order to strengthen the link between values and events.

### **Interpreting Relational Values Through Claude Romano's 'Evential Hermeneutics'**

Claude Romano's deep exploration of the notion of 'event' has to be placed in the context of his larger philosophical project of stripping phenomenology from the idealism that impregnates the Husserlian heritage and to defend, instead, a form of 'phenomenological realism'.<sup>17</sup> Very briefly, what Romano rejects from Husserl is the *constitution thesis* according to which the act of perceiving should be analysed as the act of a transcendental subject 'constituting' his world. This thesis, as Romano thinks, implies the maintaining, at least to a certain extent, of the Cartesian distinction between an internal and an external realm and of the belief that we have a privileged epistemological access to the first.

But, building on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Romano tells us that perception is not the cognitive and theoretical act of constituting the world; it is first and foremost a practical *state of being open* to the world. If we make a sufficient effort to consider seriously our bodily incarnation in the world underlying all the beliefs and judgments we have about it, we realize that 'the very mode of the world's presence for us' is not subjective but relational (Romano 2012: 443). As Romano further explains: 'In [the] structural unity of being-in-the-world, the being of the world is no less certain than my own being, and it is their reciprocity within a unitary relational structure that makes my openness to things possible' (2012: 443-444). In short, Romano's aim is to explore one central claim: that the world is never external to us since our own body, lying at the center of our perception, is part of it.

Thus, one of the interesting consequences of this philosophy of radical *immanence* is that the content of what we experience is hybrid: never the world in itself or the world as

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<sup>17</sup> For a short introduction, in French, to this philosophical project, see: Romano, C. 2016. « Pour un réalisme du monde de la vie ». *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 90(2): 269-284. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rmm.162.0269>.

constituted by our subjectivity, but the world as a relational complex that we apprehend from within: ‘The phenomenal properties of this world are [...] to be understood [...] as *relational* properties that belong to the *system* that this world forms with my phenomenal body’<sup>18</sup> (Romano 2019: 202). As one will notice, what Romano is saying here about phenomenal properties matches perfectly with what I have been trying to express concerning relational values. This is, of course, because relational values *are* phenomenal properties, i.e. axiological aspects of englobing experiences that occur whenever we engage in certain relationships.

So, the reason Romano’s philosophy offers a particularly adequate framework for understanding relational values is precisely because it places our ability to reflect upon values in its due place: embedded in the experience of the very world we value. Two propositions recurrent in Romano’s writings are especially relevant for us here<sup>19</sup>: (1) *events* are the primary ‘constituents’ of reality (and should not be confused with facts); (2) the ‘essence’ of our own being is openness to the events occurring to us in the strong sense that events configure who we are by the set of possibilities they open or close. We shall briefly examine both of these and consider what they reveal about relational values.

In a classical object-oriented worldview, an event is generally defined as a ‘change affecting things’. However, according to Romano, reducing events to the things they are composed of is our first error. As Nietzsche famously noted, when considering the sentence ‘the lightning flashes’, the grammatical structure of language is misleading because it doesn’t match the phenomenal structure of our experience. We speak as if lightning is a concrete ‘thing’ to which we attribute the property of flashing; but if we pay close attention to our experience of lightning, we realize that the lighting is nothing else than the flashing itself. In other words,

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<sup>18</sup> My translation

<sup>19</sup> These propositions are not formulated as such in Romano’s writings. They are only my own modest tentative to summarize two key aspects of his ‘evential hermeneutics’.

the event of flashing is the primitive reality from which the existence of lighting is derived, not the opposite.

The second fundamental observation Romano makes concerning events is that they imply spectators. Unlike facts that are neutral statements about state of affairs in the world, events can only be events *for* conscious beings who live them. This doesn't imply that an event is *intended* for anyone, but that events can only be apprehended and understood when approached from a first-person perspective. This is because in their proper 'evential' dimension (by opposition to their 'factual' dimension), events carry meaning for the open beings to whom they occur. We can only interpret the world *through* the events taking place. This is why they can have the power to reconfigure our beliefs and relation to the world.<sup>20</sup>

To illustrate these ideas, Romano remarks, using Nietzsche's example, that the flashing event takes place 'to an open plurality of beings: the sky, the lake, the landscape, the walker and his dog, etc.'<sup>21</sup> (1998: 37). Of course, Romano is not suggesting here that the sky or the lake are conscious spectators of the flashing event. His interest, in this passage, is not to determine if non-human beings can possess openness or consciousness. What he is saying is that, from the walker's perspective, the very being of the flashing event is inseparable from the tearing of the cloudy sky, the reflection of light on the agitated lake or the fear of the dog. Therefore, the walker is taking part in this event *with* these different beings that he now has to consider as they enter and shake up his interpretive scheme of the world. Hence, if, like Romano; we admit that our reality is constituted of events, then we have to picture ourselves not as bounded or closed entities, but as open beings, always *in the process of becoming* through

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<sup>20</sup> Romano (1998) illustrates this with the example of grief. From a factual perspective, the death of a relative is the neutral piece of a causal chain: this person died because she was ill or old etc. From an evential perspective however, this death is a radical rupture in the normal 'course of things' and the opening of a new world : from now on, my life will be without this person and not only does it affect my relation to her, but it also changes my interpretational scheme in general and my way of relating to every other being.

<sup>21</sup> My translation

the events into which we are thrown. As Romano puts it, we *are* our ‘life adventure’. The events through which we construct ourselves determine what the world means to us and open or close our horizons of possibilities. To summarize:

Just as [eventual hermeneutics] reconfigures our conception of what appears, so it alters our understanding of the “subject.” No longer is the self said to be the transcendental ego or even Dasein; Romano will coin the term “advenant” to designate the one who understands himself as open to events, to be the one who is able to undergo and respond to the realm of meaning configured by the possibilities they address to him. (DeLay 2018: 245)

Now what can we extract from Romano’s phenomenological study of events to shed light on relational values? Simply stating that relational values are events would be a rapid shortcut that doesn’t bring much clarification. However, what helps is to understand value as part of what *occurs*, in the immediate time of my experience, rather than as the pre-existing property of an object that I discover through a cognitive process, or the judgment that I later impose on it through a psychological process. If values are best understood as ‘taking place’, then the action of valuing can be apprehended as a form of *participation* in what is going on.

Participation is understood here as a mode of being<sup>22</sup>: a precognitive relation to the world, where our encounter with other beings takes place and where the crossing of our life paths appears as an *event* full of meaning – an event determining our possible futures that, as such, has a profound axiological dimension. To come back to a simple example, when I experience the value of a tree in my garden as I’m hearing the relaxing noise of the wind blowing in its leaves and observing a bird taking shelter in its branches, what I’m really doing is paying attention to

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<sup>22</sup> For a deeper analysis of participation as a mode of being, see : Hess, G. 2018. « Cosmic Consciousness and Nature from a Phenomenological Point of View ». In M. Masaeli and R. Sneller (eds.), *Cosmic Consciousness and Human Excellence: Implications for Global Ethics*, pp.101-119. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. In this paper Gerald Hess gives a phenomenological description of the successive strata of participation in its decentering movement going from the body to the cosmos.

the portion of reality, or the *event*, in which I'm participating at that moment. The tree's value occurs at the intersection of an open plurality of participants that are all, in their own way, giving meaning to the tree's existence. The tree's value is neither objective nor subjective, but it is most definitely a palpable reality since it emerges with the highest clarity when I guide my unfiltered attention on the flow of the event of which I am a part.

Hence, most importantly, Romano's philosophy helps us to nail down what we have been sketching earlier: in a relational paradigm, the ontological question of what values are and the epistemological question of how we access values are inseparable. Saying that relational values have an eventive nature amounts to saying that they are a dimension of our existential participation in the world. What ultimately matters is that our knowledge of values is embedded in our very mode of being.

### ***Conclusion: Towards an Ethic of Participation***

One way to summarize the purpose of this paper is to come back to the simple observation that lies at the heart of the ecophenomenological approach to values: we are part of what we value. The world is not an exterior and neutral sphere that we reach through a cognitive process to which we add a superfluous layer of value. On the contrary, from our located and embodied perspectives, the world, imbued with value, is an absolute beginning. It is the flesh out of which our very cognitive processes are made. What I have tried to show is that Romano's phenomenology of events offers an appropriate vocabulary to capture this paradigm shift and picture values as moving portions of reality that we participate in alongside other beings.

Thus, the notion of 'relational value', in its ontological eventive sense, is groundbreaking because it points towards a conception of ethics that ultimately deals with 'modes of being' rather than axiological properties of things. It makes no sense to consider relational values as a third class of values in addition to intrinsic and instrumental values, because they belong to a different paradigm. However, the strong intuition behind the intrinsic value concept is

expressible in relational terms: claiming that a being has intrinsic value is an abstract and dualistic way of referring to our experience of being entangled with this being through our shared openness to the valuable event in which we are taking part.

In a way, this resonates with Arne Næss's reluctance to consider environmental ethics, in itself, as a theoretical field dealing with the justification of our duties towards nature. In his vision, the adoption of a moral behavior towards our terrestrial cohabitants can only flow from the concrete and sensitive awareness of the *gestalt* structure of reality (Næss 1989). Values, as we have seen, are clearly not a production of the subject; however, they do depend on the adoption of a certain state of being open to appear. This is also why I believe relational values are conceptually linked to a form of virtue ethics.

As the French ecophenomenologist Corine Pelluchon (2018, 2019) has convincingly argued, the character traits we ought to develop in order to live in harmony with nature come from an existential dive into the sensuous layers of the world, where beings are nourishment for one another. ‘Consideration’ for what surpasses and determines us, as she tells us, is not simply a virtue. It is a *condition of possibility* of virtues. Virtues can only really flourish in my life once I have experienced my human condition, within my own body, in resonance with the world I inhabit. We can express a similar idea in the terms employed in the present research: if values are of an eventive nature, then the mode of being of *participation* – defined as a sensory awareness of what is taking place in a world we share with other beings and which always surpasses us – can serve as a grounding for environmental ethics.

Of course, the relevance of this ecophenomenological approach to environmental ethics can't only be assessed on a theoretical basis. Identifying the eventive nature of values would be of no importance if it can't help to transform, in practice, our relation to other humans and non-humans. As pragmatists do well to stress, the environmental tragedies that we are facing urge environmental philosophers not to stop at the question of why it matters to protect nature but to also consider *how* the answers they give to this question will concretely foster positive changes

and actions. One possible answer to this question is that an environmental ethic of participation responds to this call by showing that our relation to nature is determined by our lived experiences more than by our conceptual apparatus. From this perspective, what we need in priority is an enrichment of our contact with the natural world. It is by gardening that the gardener learns to care for the life forms he encounters and to give up his illusions of control. In the end, perhaps the merit of the ecophenomenological approach to environmental ethics is to strip it from its theoretical heaviness and to consider it, first and foremost, as a way of life.

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