

Sunlight, but dreaming.

Dr. Bram Thomas Arnold & Dr. Lauren Holt

[Bram:] Hello, how are you, I hope you are sitting comfortably, or are perhaps out, on foot somewhere, taking your daily lockdown exercise. I'm Dr Bram Arnold, and we were meant to be together, we were due to be in the same place, we were due to be sat in a circle, in some oak panelled room. We were hoping to engage you in a happening which would have been something like a reading group, made up of other people's writing and our own wide-ranging conversation. But instead alas, here we are, or rather there you are, listening to us, say these things we have already said into a microphone some hundreds of miles away, in some place you have never seen. So how to get from where we are to where we want to be...

[Lauren:] Hi, I'm Dr. Lauren Holt and I want to convene you, the listeners of this recording, to think into the question of what exactly is the non-instrumental or intrinsic value of biodiversity? Can it even be spoken of at all. After coronavirus upended the world, I invited Bram to help formulate this method of gathering wisdom and thoughts from you, our diaspora of scholars. We would like you to go somewhere quiet with this recording, to listen to it, to take it for a walk, or to listen to it and then take yourself for a walk.

After listening to this audio file of our thoughts and prompts, perhaps take a few days to ponder, make sparse notes, perhaps in pen or pencil, and, in whichever way you find most comfortable, as meditation, as thought, or as meander, take a dictaphone, or press record on your phone, and consider aloud your response to the question...

What is the non-instrumental or intrinsic value of biodiversity?

You might need things like a cup of tea or a biscuit, a pencil, faith and hope, and some time and a cushion.

[Bram:] We have gone through the same process and will share with you our preliminary thoughts on the intrinsic or non-instrumental value of diversity.

[Lauren:] As with many things in the humanities, we find it easiest to define our terms at the beginning.

Biodiversity is distinct from the concept of nature, although the two are closely linked. Biodiversity is the diversity of the natural world, in all its ecological variety and richness. Natural biodiversity tends

to be part of stable and mature ecosystems and associated with what we understand as wildness and autonomy from human management. Something biodiverse is usually more resilient, and a biodiverse ecosystem hangs together in integrity.

Intrinsic, non-instrumental, or inherent value: When something is valuable in itself or, valued by someone for its own sake. If something has intrinsic value in the first sense, this means that the universe is somehow a better place for that thing existing or occurring. In the second sense, something is valued irrespective of what it produces or how it interacts with the world. A philosopher's task is in part, to decide what, if anything has intrinsic value. There may be zero, one, or several things in the world with intrinsic value, ranging from intrinsic nihilism where nothing has intrinsic value, to intrinsic panism, where everything does. It may be your opinion that biodiversity doesn't have any intrinsic value at all.

[Bram:] You are welcome, as we have done, to talk about personal anecdotes, or take as a starting point some quotes or extracts from texts that speak to you of this, but we are hoping you can share your greatest truth about how you understand the non-instrumental value of biodiversity from different global perspectives, reflecting the reach of the Review. To answer it from within yourself, from your own perspective, from your own position on this planet, rotating as it is at 1,108kph whilst orbiting our nearest star. To realize that your feet are stood on the accumulative matter of 4.6billion years of evolutionary process, and that the sun today rose at 05:06 and will set 14hours 51minutes later, and that in that time we will have moved a little further around the sun, and a little closer to the end of the current lockdown, and that in that time 250,000 people will have been born, 168 billion emails will have been sent, 10,000 hectares of virgin forest will have been lost and yet, in spite of all this Mars, Jupiter and Saturn will still align themselves in the southern sky come tomorrow morning, the swallows will continue to arrive from Africa, and the tide will still rise and still fall.

[Lauren:] Here we are inviting you to speak on what are biodiversity's non-instrumental values, and how can we give them weight and sensibility, how do you give them weight and a tangible sensation, urgency or value. This is your window, the time is now, so step away from doom-scrolling the news, abandon your usual place of work, walk out into the world, or into a place of refuge. Then press record on your device, and tell us what you think, because we, all of us in the human and non-human world, really need to know.

[Bram:] Buckminster Fuller once wrote:

I know that I am not a category, a hybrid specialization,

I am not a thing – a noun.

I seem to be a verb –an evolutionary process –

An integral function of the universe, and so are you.

And those words, that thought, is invoked at the beginning of each session of my artistic happening, *Bibliotherapy for the Anthropocene*, I read them to you now in the hope that we may together through this arrive at some thoughts that are only a part of a process that is becoming, that is not a search for a definite answer, but an acceptance that all we can do is reformulate the question for the times we find ourselves in, and hope to pass it along as a positive form of doubt, a productive form of futility, a humble form of contradiction and a breathless form of hope, toward an uncertain future understanding.

[Bram:] Someone said recently that biodiversity has the same flavour as trust in a society. So what then is that, the flavour of trust, perhaps the thought is best answered by considering what happens if you take trust away from a society. Does it even look like a society anymore? *“Trust is life”* as Vinnie, a young, hopeful, slightly distracted pupil in a Hollywood film once said. And life, is biodiversity.

And biodiversity, according to the nearest dictionary is: *the diversity of the natural world, ecological variety and richness*. And the thing about the dictionary is that it is entirely composed of words, and so every time you define something you use other words and every time you look at those other words you realise they have their own interpretations, interpolations, their own trapdoors, their own baggage...

[Lauren:] But let us try. Let us try to use the tools and potential and the verbal magic that has been entrusted to us, and follow those who have gone before.

Deep Ecology is the only philosophical theory that grants intrinsic value to biodiversity. All the myriad others view it as a resource to be managed and conserved for humans to utilise. In Arne Næss’ Deep ecology, the first two principles are:

1) *The flourishing of human and nonhuman beings has value in itself. The value of nonhuman beings is independent of their usefulness to human beings.*

2) *Richness of kinds of living beings has value in itself.*

"Principle 2 concerns diversity and complexity. From an ecological standpoint, complexity and symbiosis are conditions for maximizing diversity. So-called simple, lower, or primitive species of plants and animals contribute essentially to richness and diversity of life. They have value in themselves and are not merely steps toward the so-called higher or rational life-forms. The second principle presupposes that life itself, as a process over evolutionary time, implies an increase of diversity and richness."

It is this richness that is particularly valuable to me, the complexity of a mature ecosystem. When I think of what is being lost, the way these are being broken up, I see it as a terrible simplification.

Deep ecology says *"The presence of inherent value in a natural object is independent of any awareness, interest, or appreciation of it by any conscious being."*

It is this multifaceted living quality that is of value, in contrast to a bare dead planet or a sterile but complicated city. And it is in the natural world that true complexity is found...

[Bram:] Words have their own methods, abuses and uses. *The Natural World* for example, just what is that, pray tell. Is this *The Natural World* that I am walking in now? Are you walking in the natural world out there? I feel I must tell you where I am briefly, for I am walking round the post-industrial landscape of West Cornwall, I am stood near an old mine engine house, where the engine would have been kept to pump the water out of the ground so that the miners could go down there and burrow their tunnels, beneath me. There are hundreds of miles of tunnels burrowed into hollowed rock to extract copper and tin, and so exactly which bit of this world is the natural bit that our dictionary so lightly speaks of? In which bit of it does biodiversity have a value or a non-instrumental value, the water in the glass is muddled, I cannot take my hand away anymore, I notice its attachments, the atomic perforations in the skin and my own beings ever-changing status in the strata of our being and time.

This engine house, is now filled mainly with Ravens and Ravens twigs, the things the Raven has thrown down from its nest at the top of the chimneystack down into the chamber, the pigeon, the jackdaws, the sparrows, this engine house, this wind tunnel, is this the natural world? Over here, under a gorse bush is a birds nest, we've been watching these song thrushes since they were four little blue eggs, a mere two weeks ago, and now there are four new song thrushes in the world, they fledged this morning, and I will never know for certain that I have seen them again.

And yet,

I love,
that I know,
that they exist,
& there is no economic cost for love, nor for emotion.

[Bram:] If the ideal of wilderness was cultivated by transcendental philosophers on the great plains of America, with Ansel Adams as the artist-in-residence, then history would suggest it no longer exists, that there is no longer any farther out west for frontiersmen to push to. In a world where the forest fires of distant parts of Siberia are highlighted not by the worlds press but by curious members of the public watching them on Google Earth, or a world where there are now large gangs roaming the arctic summer harvesting mammoth ivory from melting permafrost, or a world where 97% of all freshwater samples have been found to be polluted, like the alpine glaciers of Switzerland, with microplastics, then perhaps we have truly entered a world where there is no longer any terra incognita on the map, where mystery and myths are maybe not dying, but undergoing a new form of transformation.

[Lauren:] Robinson Jeffers wrote

*The greatest beauty is
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty
of the universe. Love that, not man
Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions,
or drown in despair when his days darken.*

The 'recovering environmentalist' and author Paul Kingsnorth writes: *"The Amazon isn't important because it is 'untouched'; it is important because it is wild, in the sense that it is self-willed. It is lived in and from by humans, but it is not created and controlled by them. It teems with a great, shifting, complex diversity of both human and non-human life, and no species dominates the mix. It is a complex, working eco-system that is also a human-culture system, because, in any kind of worthwhile world, the two are linked. This is what intelligent green thinking has always called for: human and non-human nature working in some degree of harmony, in a modern world of compromise and change in which some principles, nevertheless are worth cleaving to"*.

Cleaving has two meanings. It is an auto-antonym, a *Janus* word. A word with multiple meanings of which one is the reverse of another... We can be cleaved from, or cleave to, biodiversity and nature... Perhaps we can only come to one through the other...

Imagine a sealed bottle that has somehow managed to stabilize and create its own internal ecosystem. This is broadly speaking, the state of our planet. We cannot be partisan, cannot separate one thing from another, and say we prefer this part to that part and interfere in maximising the part we prefer, without endangering the whole. We know this. But how to change? What's wrong?

[Lauren:] After much philosophical wrangling, an academic friend of mine endorsed this definition of a utilitarian's view of the value of life. "A utilitarian's opinion of their own life is that it only has value according to how much wellbeing or utility it contains or affects to themselves or others. They have moral standing as a sentient being but this does not mean their life is intrinsically valuable if, for example, it is net negative in terms of suffering or negative qualia."

As such, it seems to me, a utilitarian views their own life only instrumentally. A life is valuable only in terms of how much wellbeing it affords its owner or others. I have always found this hard to accept. Because many things are not pleasurable but are valuable, and I intuitively feel my life has meaning irrespective of what I do for others or if its going well for me.

Are we for colonising mars, mining asteroids, uploading our brains, living forever, feeling only pleasure, rushing towards the superintelligence, the singularity? Efficiency, efficiency efficiency. And are the natural resources, complexity, living matter of the planet just what we utilize to create that techno future? Are we for such a soulless arrangement? If utility is the foundation of our morality then where does that leave us... We are hollow if our lives are only valuable when we are super-people, experiencing maximum wellbeing at the cost of everything else.

[Bram:] I often say I am an artist, who started with walking, and kept going and some years ago whilst walking from London to Switzerland I would walk towards the distant horizon, that far off uncertainty, walking always amongst things and beings, many wild places and yet, at the same time, I would also walk along many field edges planted with many and the same crop, the same smell and the same crop in Northern France as Southern Kent, the same mono-cultural activity, the same lack of redundancy in the system, in the culture, in the natural environment. And that cultural redundancy, that excess in the system, is what we lose when we lose biodiversity. We are beings of imagination and imagination requires redundant space to function in, to imagine into, some distant horizon to aim for, with all possible routes between here and there.

[Lauren:] To imagine a world without biodiversity is a philosophical thought experiment. What would it be like for all flora and fauna on the planet to be replaced by some average body, intelligence, experience? Or, for only the human to remain... What if then all the human lives were the same? What if everything in that sealed bottle were the same? Ecological theory would suggest it could not survive. Biodiversity is fractally important; valuable at any scale or level one chooses to look at. But even without the resilience it gives, I feel there is something intrinsically of worth about a complex variety of experiences, a complex variety of species, a complex variety of life, mediated through different bodies and tastes, orientations, ideas, cultural knowledge and inter-species collaboration. In the thought experiment where everything is genetically identical and has the same experiences, what a strange and awful world that would be: endless fields of genetically modified wheat, a planet of daisies, a planet of ice, a lump of stone.

Perhaps an infinite field of just one species, just us, one type of experience, will be an obliteration of possibility, a world gone numb, an annihilation.

Thomas Berry writes: *"We are talking only to ourselves. We are not talking to the rivers, we are not listening to the wind and stars. We have broken the great conversation. By breaking that conversation we have shattered the universe."*

[Lauren:] I wanted to share this extract, from Jeff Vandermeer's novel *Annihilation*: "What I found when I finally stood there, hands on bent knees, peering down into that tidal pool, was a rare species of colossal starfish, six-armed, larger than a saucepan, that bled a dark gold color into the still water as if it were on fire. Most of us professionals eschewed its scientific name for the more apt "destroyer of worlds". It was covered in thick spines, and along the edges I could just see, fringed with emerald green, the most delicate of transparent cilia, thousands of them propelling it along its appointed route as it searched for its prey: other, lesser starfish.

But the longer I stared at it, the less comprehensible the creature became. The more it became something so alien to me, the more I had a sense that I knew nothing at all — about nature, about ecosystems. There was something about my mood and the dark glow that eclipsed sense, that made me see this creature, which had indeed been assigned a place in taxonomy — catalogued, studied and described — irreducible down to any of that. And if I kept looking, I knew that ultimately I would have to admit I knew less than nothing about myself as well, whether that was a lie or the truth."

[Bram:] Language is everything about how we construct our thoughts and construct our worlds, and language is built on a structure of letters, grammar, syntax and fluid definition. Such formations can be applied to biodiversity and how it functions in that same capacity to the planet. Without language I would not be stumbling through these words to you now, and without biodiversity the world would not have arrived at trees, or gorse bushes, or wrens or mycelium, or crows, or pangolins or us. You need redundancy in an ecological sphere in the same way you need space in a language: something to thrive when something struggles, a moment to breathe whilst others speak, something to live when something else dies, the seeming purposelessness of space in a sentence is what gives meaning to mouths. Biodiversity is to the world what language is to humanity, language is the foundational strata upon which all forms of civilization are built, such is biodiversity to the planet. So how can we account for this outside of our economic lens?

[Lauren:] When I studied wasps, everybody used to ask me “what’s the point of wasps”. At least 80% of people asked me that question, and it always used to drive me mad because although wasps had their own ecological niche, I wanted people to understand them as ends in themselves. They didn’t owe any human anything in terms of their existence. Just because they stung a lot and didn’t make honey, didn’t make them any less valuable to the universe. It wasn’t until I learned about Kant and things as ‘ends in themselves’ I had words to explain. But the feeling is older than words.

The poet Robinson Jeffers wrote to Sister Mary James Power — a principal and teacher at a girls’ Catholic high school in Massachusetts, in response to a letter in which she asked him to explain his metaphysics. *“I believe that the universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, influencing each other, therefore parts of one organic whole. This is physics, I believe, as well as religion.”*

The relationship Jeffers so beautifully explains relates to our connection with the ‘outer’ world. It’s easy to say most things have an instrumental value, even when this is a role in an ecosystem or as a food source, or our own place in human society. But as well as having to ask the question of whether other living things have it, we often forget our own inherent value. Many of us don’t treat other humans everyday with intrinsic value, only instrumental worth, and perhaps modern life in crowded cities can only work that way or else we’d get emotionally fried by the immensity of all the souls around us. We broadly live in a utilitarian way, especially in the West. But soon it becomes harder and harder to give ourselves intrinsic value. What am I, separate to how society sees me, how much am I worth as an employee and carer and citizen, especially viewed through that economic lens? If we fail to grant other life forms intrinsic value, we’re making the whole situation still worse. But, if I start from the idea that other organisms have intrinsic worth, then I must grant it to everyone, and then even to

myself. Suddenly, my experience of myself in the world has changed. I'm not longer severed from myself. I can also understand that everything is held in a web of relationships. A pangolin sneezes in China in December, and by the spring, governments around the world are pumping trillions into the economy. The vastness of the world and its parts are, as Robinson Jeffers says, in constant communication with each other, influencing each other, and therefore parts of one organic whole. And what seems to me is so rarely felt, is each part is itself whole.

But for humans I think, there are so many things we do and that have happened to us that it's the normal experience of life that our value is to be worked upon and raises and falls with the great market of human interactions. To feel a sense of having had and lost some infinite thing. That thing is our intrinsic worth as we live in a world that sees us mainly as objects.

Where is divinity? The one place we were told it couldn't be. And if it's in us, it's in everything. And you are sunlight, but dreaming.

I would like to propose a new Golden rule, to look for the intrinsic value, the soul in everything. That doesn't mean you won't also see the instrumental value of things as well. To sometimes eat meat, or interact with another person in a prescribed way. Instrumental value of course exists, but it seems to me that we've forgotten the other type of value completely. This is where I'm at, today, in 2020, as things crumble, and a great falling apart and humbling might just be falling towards something better. I have come home to myself. And if I can see that I am connected to the outside, and connected to the inside, then I am whole. And if I am whole, and not alienated from myself and my environment, then maybe I am less likely to stamp about and make trouble for myself and the world.

[Bram:] I find myself trying to escape talking about value, but I keep getting sucked back into its traps, they are everywhere in how we construct sentences in western society: use, value, worth, profit, product, cost, loss, all these signifiers, all these constructs we have created. Out here, this stuff is just growing, it's just spring, under the desperate sudden gush of sunlight, it is all just growing, just being. None of those things matter to it. And yet, alas, they do matter to it, because we can make them, because we can, by eliminating an intrinsic value within them, take it from them. And by taking it from them we can take it for ourselves.

The things we lose first when we talk about economic value are emotion, and care and consideration, and conviviality and companionship, none of these things equate very well to the monetary economy. But I care about this, I care that it exists and that I can come here in the morning and see a woodcock, and four Songthrushes in a nest, just before they fledge.

And now her nest is empty, I wonder whether she'll use it again or whether she rebuilds, and I love that I do not know, may never know, there is a question here about the relationship between knowledge and care: how can you care for something if you do not know about it? And how can you get to know something without affecting it?

[Lauren:] I am scared of the concept of natural capital. We are seeing that although a price can in theory be put upon anything, the concept of money keeps changing. It is, in effect, meaningless. If the government can print money to manage the impacts of coronavirus, then in theory money could be created to buy or exclusively own ecosystem services, or replace them, or conserve them. The price, no matter how high, is meaningless. If the world is one organic whole anyway, we cannot even chop it up in this way. What price is the whole world?

[Bram:] A buzzard circles above me with mild interest, it veers away. The buzzard does what it wants. Language is conditional, it is always good for someone and bad for someone, something can have intrinsic horror, intrinsic beauty, intrinsic usefulness, purpose, sensibility, disposition, my role as an artist is sometimes as a prison guard of prisms, a perpetual attempt to keep tabs on who is looking through what prism at who and what and when and how.

I have become interested in listening to conversations fade into the background of the landscape and disappear completely like Nightjars on a limb. Nightjars are not just ground nesting, they are ground *living*, they are quickly flushed from a nest, they are eager to flee, they are delicate, they are important, they look like leaves, mashed into the ground by too many feet, they look like lichen, enjoying itself, happy in the clean air, they sound like goats, dying in the night. We too often roam a landscape and talk about what it is best for, or what we think is best for it, what might be best for it, what was it,
what is it,
and the orchid just blooms, regardless,
the cuckoos just rob nests, regardless,
the nightjars, squeal like goats in the night, regardless,
the mycelium spreads beneath us, regardless,
time becomes deeper, regardless,
the brown trout in the river, recover from environmental pollution, regardless,
the beech trees, brought over in the 1500's, keep growing, regardless,
the laurels, the non native, concrete dead understory, will be kept here, regardless,

but landscape becomes wild, best, when regarded less.

[Bram:] *Virus*: A pathogenic agent, a protein coated particle of RNA or DNA, capable of increasing rapidly inside a living cell, an illness caused by a virus.

[Lauren:] Before coronavirus really took off, I was feeling more and more humans needed to be put in quarantine away from nature to recover from whatever disease it is currently suffering from. Now, I think it might be possible for not a re-wilding, but a future-wilding for otherwise *"Our footsteps [will] often feel heavy"*. Isabella Tree, writes: *Rewilding Knepp has changed the way we look at the world and much of it is depressing. When we go for a walk with friends elsewhere in the countryside - the same walks we used to enjoy without thinking in the past - chances are what we notice most is the silence and the stillness. Compared with Knepp, most of Britain seems like a desert. It brings an aching sadness, a sense of loss and frustration articulated best by the great American conservationist Aldo Leopold almost a century ago: ' One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.'*

I want us to avoid that world of wounds.

[Bram:] What's so sad about all this is we have lost the linguistic and the grammatical capability for just appreciating this stuff, for what it is, we have moved so far from having the words to speak of the world without us or our desires, that we do not have even the syntax for saying it. There is a lot of talk of baselines these days in environmental departments and people, standing in fields, counting things. They talk of shifting baselines and the problem of never being able to have a starting point, something to lean on, history is sticky and deep and keeps going back, the future stretches out forever.

In Victorian London you could go to a certain street on any given day for weeks on end during peak season and see van after van filled with the minor corpses of Skylarks, hundreds of thousands of Skylarks, unimaginable quantities of skylarks for human consumption in Lark tarts or some other cockney delicacy. The true horror of this figure though, is that what the Victorians did with their mouths and their bellies is as nothing compared to what modern forms of agriculture have done to the breeding populations of Skylarks. They are no longer for sale.

[Lauren:] We want to avoid this world of wounds not only for ourselves but for something else. I believe that as deep ecology says, *"The presence of inherent value in a natural object is independent of any awareness, interest, or appreciation of it by any conscious being."* Even humans. I cannot help

but think that a world without us would still have plenty of value independent to our use of it. To therefore frame biodiversity as just instrumentally useful, especially to humans, is to forget that it was there first. We have come out of biodiversity, not into it.

Maybe the new world after coronavirus consists of, as Paul Kingsnorth writes: "Remembering that you are one life form among many and understanding that everything has intrinsic value. If you want to call this 'eco-centrism' or 'deep ecology' do it. If you want to call it something else do that. Sit on the grass, and touch a tree trunk, walk in the hills dig the garden, look at what you find in the soil, marvel at what the hell this thing called life could possibly be. Value it for what it is, try to understand what it is..."

[Bram:] *Biodiversity is the grand mass of everything in that short stretch of atmosphere between the floor and the edge of the sky...*

Biodiversity is the collective outcome of 4.6billion years of experimentation, without aims, hypothesis, methods or madness...

Biodiversity is wrens, and blackbirds, and blackcaps and bullfinches, bramble and celandine, songthrush and gorse, mineshaft and wasteground, high street and high summer...

Biodiversity is everything between you and me...

Biodiversity has no moral position, no intention, no doubt, no plan, no hope, but rich fecundity...

Biodiversity is everything you have ever seen and indeed the very possibility of seeing itself...