

Foundations of a General Ethics: Selves, Sentient Beings, and Other Responsively Cohesive Structures

WARWICK FOX

1. A World of Forms of Organization or Structures

Everything we can refer to – physical, biological, psychological, or a human-created entity, institution, activity, or expression of some kind, and whether constituted of brute physical stuff or less tangible complexes of social arrangements, ideas, images, movements, and so on – can be considered in terms of its form of organization or structure. This applies even if what we want to say about these things is that they represent a disorganized or unstructured example of their kind or else that they simply lack any discernible form of internal organization or structure in the sense that their internal structure is undifferentiated or homogenous as opposed to being ‘all over the place’. We therefore live in a world in which everything can be characterized, either positively or negatively, in terms of its form of organization or structure. (The terms ‘form of organization’ and ‘structure’ can be used interchangeably in the context of this paper, although I will tend to use the term ‘structure’ in what follows.)

Many structures possess an externally observable form only, whereas others, including ourselves, possess, in addition, an inner, experiential dimension. Moreover, the development of neuroscience allows us to assert that this inner, experiential dimension – however complex or rudimentary it might be in any given instance – is not some kind of fundamentally separate metaphysical ‘add-on’ that just happens to be bestowed upon or attached to certain structures, but is rather a function of the workings *of* these structures. These structures therefore possess not only an objectively specifiable *form* but also an experiential capacity, which, when not dormant, issues in the occurrent experiential (or, in a broad construal of the term, mental) *content* of that structure.

I am grateful to Isis Brook, Simon Hailwood, and Antony Radford for discussions relating to the theory of responsive cohesion.

We often find it convenient to refer to structures that possess only a tangible, physical form as (mere) *things* and to structures that possess a tangible, physical form that issues in an inner, experiential dimension as *beings*. As Thomas Nagel has taught us to say, it is 'like' something – it *feels* like something – to be a *being* whereas it is not 'like' anything to be a *thing*.¹ Ethicists mark this distinction in terms of the concept of *sentience*, the capacity to feel: (mere) things are nonsentient whereas beings are sentient. However, we also need to note that there are other kinds of structures in the world besides mere things on the one hand and beings on the other hand. Specifically, there are all the intangible – or at least less tangible – kinds of structures that we routinely refer in to in everyday life, ranging from examples such as the mess on my desk or the kind and degree of order in my thoughts and feelings to the structure of a conversation, theory, drama, or piece of music. We could call these non-thing-like (or at least less-thing-like) and non-being-like structures *complexes*. If we do this, then we can say that the class of structures in general – which is to say everything we can refer to – consists of (intangible) complexes, (tangible) things, and beings. In what follows I will be primarily interested in the distinction between *mere structures* (regardless of whether they assume the tangible form of 'things' or the intangible form of 'complexes') and *beings*.

Within the class of sentient beings themselves, some beings are merely sentient whereas some are conscious *of* their sentient existence or 'inner life'. Beings that are merely sentient experience things in a first-order, moment-to-moment way but do not possess any higher-order consciousness of this fact. Thus, they are not self-aware in any given moment, let alone aware of their own existence in a temporally extended sense. This means that whatever other kinds of implicit memory retention capacities these beings might have, they do not possess what is discussed in the literature as autobiographical memory; they do not constitute autobiographical selves with a personal past, a personal present, a projected personal future, and an awareness that their autobiographical awareness will eventually cease to exist, which is to say an awareness of their own death. In contrast, some sentient beings are aware of their own existence in a temporally extended sense; they possess autobiographical memory and can be characterized as autobiographical selves. It is useful to mark the distinction between these two kinds of beings by

¹ Thomas Nagel's famous 1974 essay 'What Is it Like to Be a Bat?' is reprinted in his collection *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Canto ed., 1991), 165–180.

Foundations of a General Ethics

referring to the former as (mere) *sentient beings* and the latter as *selves*.²

Epistemologically speaking, there is a crucial difference between sentient beings and selves on the one hand and mere structures on the other hand. As selves we are capable of coming to know – indeed, we can only truly come to know – the nature and value of both sentience and selfhood ‘from the inside’ whereas we can only come to know the nature and value of structures *per se* (including our own externally observable structure) ‘from the outside’. The former perspective has been variously referred to as a first-person, personal, subjective, or internal view or perspective and the latter as a third-person, impersonal, objective, or external view or perspective. Since I want to refer to both selves and other sentient beings in terms of these perspectives, it makes sense to avoid the confusing semantic interference effects that can arise by referring to the inner life of *nonhuman* sentient beings from a ‘first-person’ or ‘personal’ perspective, or even from a ‘subjective’ perspective (since the notion of subjectivity is often associated with the idea of the kind of self-aware subjectivity exhibited by ‘persons’). I will therefore simply distinguish these perspectives by referring to them as ‘internal’ and ‘external’ perspectives respectively.³ We can therefore say that although I, a fruit bat (*Megachiroptera*), and a cricket bat can all be viewed from an external perspective, a cricket bat can *only* be viewed from an external perspective whereas we can also

² Two points here. First, for an overview of the emerging range of evidence that suggests that beings really do divide into two groups like this, see Warwick Fox, *A Theory of General Ethics: Human Relationships, Nature, and the Built Environment* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), chs 6–8. See also Derek Penn, Keith Holyoak, and Daniel Povinelli, ‘Darwin’s Mistake: Explaining the Discontinuity between Human and Nonhuman Minds’, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* **31** (2008): 109–178. Second, ethicists have tended to use the term ‘persons’ rather than ‘selves’ in this context. However, although the evidence – more of which I will cite in the concluding section – suggests that people are the only selves we currently know of, there seems to be no reason in principle why there might not be other selves elsewhere in the universe or created by people here on Earth. The term ‘persons’ – even in the wider sense that some ethicists want to give it (i.e. to cover nonhuman selves) – therefore seems increasingly archaic and parochial, not to mention misleading to ordinary readers, so I prefer to use the term ‘selves’.

³ Thomas Nagel employs this form of the distinction in his influential essay ‘Moral Luck’, repr. in Nagel, *op. cit.*, 24–38.

sensibly ask what I or a fruit bat is like from an internal perspective, which is to say from the perspective of being me or the fruit bat.

2. Approaching Ethics from the Internal Perspective: the Value of Selves and Sentient Beings

It would seem to be a relatively simple matter to provide a straightforward, naturalistic account of how this epistemological difference between sentient beings and selves on the one hand and mere structures on the other hand has played out in our ethical thinking. In the case of selves, we can say that our own immediate, inner awareness of the value of our own existence and well-being is (in the case of normal, healthy human beings) self-evident and self-validating. (It is self-evident because it is given to us in our immediate experience and it is self-validating because it requires no reference to anyone else to verify the fact of this self-evident matter; indeed, such reference to others would be pointless because others can only directly experience their own experience rather than our experience.) Beyond this, however, other sources of evidence overwhelmingly suggest to us that the same kind of evidence for the value of their existence also applies to everyone else. First, we know this through the explicit verbal – or other symbolically mediated (e.g. sign language) – reports of others. We are compulsive communicators ('mindsharers' in Merlin Donald's telling phrase⁴) who report the same self-evident and self-validating fact to each other in multitudinous ways. Second, we know it because these reports are reinforced by appropriate nonverbal behavior. Third – and this is surely the clincher – it is now undeniable that other people possess the same causal structure (namely, the same kind of central nervous system) that underpins the capacities for selfhood that we value in ourselves. When we put these sources of evidence together with the basic requirement for consistency in our reasoning (without which rational argumentation is not possible), then we are rationally compelled to accept the conclusion that it would be arbitrary to recognize the self-evident and self-validating value of our own existence and well-being but to deny it in the case of others. The mutual acceptance of this conclusion among rational selves in turn drives the development of a variety of implicitly or explicitly codified forms of interhuman ethics. These forms of ethics provide us with a set of reasonable

⁴ Merlin Donald, *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

Foundations of a General Ethics

expectations to which others can hold us (formally codified as ‘obligations’) and to which we can hold others (sometimes codified as ‘rights’). These expectations are in turn backed up by various kinds of social and legal sanctions whose legitimacy derives from the mutual recognition by rational selves of the value of each other’s existence and well-being and whose purpose is to rehabilitate, punish, or deter those who transgress these mutually accepted expectations.

Ethically speaking, something like this position – reached in various historically, culturally, and intellectually influenced ways (all of which applies just as surely to the naturalistic account I have just given) – is how things have stood for a long time: from the time of the Greek philosophers until at least the 1970s, the various dominant versions of philosophical ethics have been overwhelming focused on the flourishing and wellbeing of selves, both individually and collectively, together with concomitant ideas of respect for selves. The upshot is that for most of Western intellectual history, ‘ethics’ has effectively meant ‘human ethics’. This began to change in the 1970s with the difficult, historically late birth of ‘environmental ethics’, which was generally understood to refer to the study of the ethical relevance, if any, of the beings and entities that constituted the rest of nonhuman nature.

Some of the surest inroads here were made in regard to the moral status of other sentient beings. The fact that these arguments have seemed to many observers to be on surer footing than a variety of others in environmental ethics is no doubt due to the fact that they have been able to draw on many of the same argumentative resources as those that have informed human ethics – all the more so in the light of the understandings we have been gaining from evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and comparative psychology. Thus, the kind of thinking that informs arguments in animal ethics can be accounted for in roughly similar naturalistic terms to the account I gave for the development of human ethics. First, even if we set aside our own, almost certainly unique, autobiographical sense of self, it remains the case that our own immediate, inner awareness tells us, among other things, that we especially do not like to be subject to pain and suffering. This understanding is again self-evident and self-validating. Second, we can, to a certain degree of refinement, explain both the evolutionary causal development and the existent causal structure of sentience in other animals. This means that we now have overwhelming reasons, based on the relative similarity of evolutionary paths and structure of central nervous systems, to believe that many other animals are sentient and, thus, that they are ‘like us’ and,

Warwick Fox

conversely, that we are ‘like them’ to the extent that it would be self-evidently bad to be in their experiential state when they are subjected to any form of pain or suffering. Third, this understanding is reinforced by appropriate nonverbal behavior in nonhuman animals just as surely as it is in other humans.

The main difference in the accounts I have given of the thinking that underpins human ethics and animal ethics is that nonhuman animals cannot also reinforce our appreciation of their sentience in terms of linguistic behavior. (I have therefore referred to nonhuman animals elsewhere as ‘iso-experients’ – islands of experience – as opposed to ‘mindsharers’.⁵) However, this also holds in regard to some categories of humans such as infants, prelingually deaf people who have not been exposed to sign language, wild or feral children who were never exposed to language, and people who have suffered global aphasia after stroke. Yet in none of these cases do we have sufficient reason to think that these people are not sentient; the other sources of evidence are overwhelming as they stand. Thus, coupled with the requirement for consistency in our reasoning, we seem again to be rationally compelled to accept the conclusion that it would be arbitrary to recognize the self-evident and self-validating disvalue of our own pain and suffering but to deny it in the case of other sentient beings. Moreover, the fact that this recognition is not mutual between selves and beings that are merely sentient hardly undermines this conclusion; rather, rational selves can readily appreciate the fact that *they* would not wish to be subjected to unnecessary pain and suffering if they were merely sentient and that *they* would want those who could understand this wish to respect it. In ethical contexts, this point is often referred to by asserting that *moral agents* have moral obligations in respect of not only other moral agents – or healthy, normally developed selves in the foregoing – but also *moral patients*, which, in the context of the discussion to this point, can be taken to include not only sentient nonhuman animals but also certain classes of humans themselves such as infants, those who have never gained language, people with serious dementia, the insane, and people with certain kinds of brain damage.

3. Taking the Internal Perspective too Far: Mere Structures

Beyond this point – or something very like it – environmental ethics is mired in controversy. I think that one reason for this is that a number

⁵ Fox, op. cit., *passim*.

Foundations of a General Ethics

of environmental ethicists have tried to continue the tack of arguing along the lines that I have sketched for human ethics and animal ethics in which the internal perspective plays a fundamental role. Thus, those who argue for the value of nonsentient living things have tended to do so on the basis that these things internally embody (albeit in a *nonsentient* way) a 'will to live' (Albert Schweitzer), 'interests' (Kenneth Goodpaster, Robin Attfield), 'needs' (Gary Varner, Attfield), or a 'good of their own' such that 'Things that happen to them can be judged, *from their standpoint*, to be favorable or unfavorable to them' (Paul Taylor, my emphasis).⁶ More subtly, Holmes Rolston has argued that a discriminatory ability has been built into living things by natural selection in the form of a 'normative' 'genetic set' that 'distinguishes between what *is* and what *ought to be*' such that the physical state that the organism 'defends' is a 'valued state'.⁷ Some environmental ethicists have gone even further and attempted to extend these kinds of nonsentient versions of conativist arguments as far as entities or collectivities such as species, ecosystems, and the ecosphere itself.⁸ However, Peter Singer, who insists that the criterion of sentience is 'the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others',⁹ counters, effectively I think, that ethicists who employ these kinds of arguments

⁶ For a general overview and critical introduction to Schweitzer's views, see Mary Anne Warren, *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 2; Kenneth Goodpaster, 'On Being Morally Considerable', repr. in Michael Zimmerman, gen. ed., *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 56–70; Robin Attfield, 'The Good of Trees', repr. in David Schmidtz and Elizabeth Willott, eds, *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58–71; Gary Varner, *In Nature's Interests?: Interests, Animal Rights, and Environmental Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Gary Varner, 'Biocentric Individualism', in Schmidtz and Willott, op. cit., 108–120; Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 'standpoint' quotation, 63.

⁷ Holmes Rolston III, 'Value in Nature and the Nature of Value', repr. in Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III, eds, *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 145; Holmes Rolston III, 'Respect for Life: Counting What Singer Finds of no Account', in Dale Jamieson, ed., *Singer and his Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 251.

⁸ Rolston, op. cit. (both papers); James Heffernan, 'The Land Ethic: A Critical Reappraisal', *Environmental Ethics* 4 (1982): 235–247.

⁹ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2nd ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 9.

... use language metaphorically and then argue as if what they had said was literally true. We may often talk about plants 'seeking' water or light so that they can survive, and this way of thinking about plants makes it easier to accept talk of their 'will to live', or of them 'pursuing' their own good. But once we stop to reflect on the fact that plants are not conscious and cannot engage in any intentional behaviour, it is clear that all this language is metaphorical; one might just as well say that a river is pursuing its own good and striving to reach the sea, or that the 'good' of a guided missile is to blow itself up along with its target ... [In fact, however,] it is possible to give a purely physical explanation of what is happening; and in the absence of consciousness, there is no good reason why we should have greater respect for the physical processes that govern the growth and decay of living things than we have for those that govern nonliving things.¹⁰

Singer is, I think rightly, insisting here that all we have in the case of nonsentient natural entities is externally observable structures and, thus, that the attempt to adopt some kind of quasi-internal perspective is misplaced. However, where Singer goes wrong, I think, is in his equally adamant insistence that we have no moral obligations in respect of things that do not have 'interests', which is to say in respect of things that do not have an internal perspective, that are not sentient, that are merely structures. In order to explain this point I need to return to the epistemological difference I referred to earlier between the ways in which we can come to know the nature and value of selves and sentient beings on the one hand and structures on the other hand. Specifically, I noted that just as we can only truly come to know the nature and value of selfhood and sentience from an internal perspective, so we can only come to know the nature and value of mere structures from an external perspective. The upshot is that it is as pointless to look for the value of mere structures 'from the inside' – such as in terms of 'interests' or 'needs' that can be 'benefitted', 'frustrated', or 'harmed' – when they have no 'inside' as it is to look for the value of sentient beings and selves 'from the outside' when these features exist only 'on the inside'. Thus, Singer's dismissal of the first-order moral relevance of mere structures strikes me as being as misplaced as a hard-line behaviourist's

¹⁰ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 279.

dismissal of conscious experience. Both are looking in the wrong place: it make no more sense to dismiss the potential value of mere structures because we have looked in the wrong place to recognize it (i.e. on the 'inside') than it does to dismiss the value of conscious experience because we have looked in the wrong place to recognize it (in this case, on the 'outside'). In order to consider the question properly, we need to look in the right place.¹¹

4. Approaching Ethics from the External Perspective: the Value of Responsively Cohesive Structures

This brings us to the question of whether or not some kinds of structures might reasonably be considered to be valuable when considered simply in terms of their externally observable structure. (A closely related possibility is that some kinds of structures might consistently be found to underpin our most informed and considered judgments of value, in which case we could say that value supervenes on these structures.) I want to address this question by arguing, first, that there are three basic or primary kinds of structures and, second, that, other things being equal, we generally have good reasons for thinking that one of these basic structures is far more valuable than the other two – indeed, we often have good reasons for thinking that the other two are disvaluable. I will consider these two points in turn.

(i) Three basic or primary kinds of structures

The single most basic distinction we can make about the structure of anything is simply to note whether (or to what extent) it can be characterized *as* structured in some way or whether (or to what extent) it can't. We trade on this distinction all the time. Of those things that do possess some kind of structure, the next most basic distinction we can make is between those structures whose order can be characterized as generated or maintained by the mutual responsiveness of their elements or salient features and those whose order

¹¹ Rolston ('Respect for Life', op. cit.) is also quite explicit about the fact that Singer is looking for the value of nonsentient living things – and failing to find any – in what I am calling the 'wrong place'; however, as indicated, Rolston addresses this issue in a quite different way to the way in which I will below.

cannot be characterized in this way. We also trade on this distinction all the time, but we tend to do so in more tacit ways than in the case of structure (or organization) and lack of structure (or disorganization). For example, this distinction underpins the common distinction we make between living and nonliving things. But it is hardly restricted to this distinction; for example, we also trade on this distinction when we refer metaphorically to things that have a 'living' as opposed to a 'lifeless' or 'dead' quality about them, regardless of whether or not they are literally alive.

These considerations give us three basic ways in which things can be structured: they can cohere in a relatively regimented or fixed way; they can cohere by virtue of the mutual responsiveness of their elements or salient features; or they can simply fail to cohere (i.e. be unstructured or disorganized). I therefore refer to these three basic structures or forms of organization as *fixed cohesion*, *responsive cohesion*, and *discohesion*, respectively. If the elements or salient features that constitute examples of fixed cohesion convey a sense of being simply 'stuck together', and if the elements or salient features that constitute examples of discohesion convey a sense of 'failing to stick together', then the elements or salient features that constitute examples of responsive cohesion convey a sense of actively 'sticking together'.¹²

It is important to note that responsive cohesion should not be thought of as constituting some kind of midpoint between fixed cohesion and discohesion. Rather, it is theoretically possible to have an example of something that is a combination – not a genuine mixture, obviously; but a combination – of rigid order and complete disorganization but that contains no aspects of responsive cohesion. It is therefore appropriate to envisage the three logically distinct structures I have outlined as representing the corners or vertices of a triangle that defines an 'organization space' onto which we can plot real world examples. I find it convenient to think of the line between fixed cohesion and discohesion as the base of this notional triangle and responsive cohesion as the apex. (If the appropriateness of this 'superior' location is not already obvious, then it will become so in the next subsection of this discussion.) Exemplary forms of any

¹² The term 'cohere' means to cling, hold, stick, or adhere together; from Latin *cohaerere*, from *co-* together + *haerere* to cling, adhere. The term *responsive* derives from the Latin *rēspōsum* answer. Thus, the term *responsive cohesion* can also be thought of as referring to a structure or form of organization that holds by virtue of the mutual 'answering to each other' of its elements or salient features.

one of these structures would then be plotted on or very close to the appropriate corner of this triangle, combinations of any two at an appropriate point along one of the sides of the triangle, and combinations of all three at an appropriate point within the triangle.

The final point I want to make in this section is that the categories I have distinguished – like other terms that apply to notions of order, structure, or organization in everyday use – are readily applicable, and should be understood as intended to apply, in contexts that range across the literal/metaphorical divide, the intentional/functional divide, and the static/dynamic divide. For example, we might say that someone's desk is a 'mess' or that someone's behavior is 'all over the place'. The first sounds literal, the second metaphorical, but we have no day-to-day problem applying or understanding terms relating to the organization of things in ways that might be deemed literal in one context and metaphorical in another. Similarly, the elements or salient features that constitute some item of interest might be intentionally responsive to each other in various ways (e.g. the members of a team, choir, or society) or simply functionally responsive to each other (e.g. the parts of a living organism or the salient features of an artistic work). Finally, the fact that something is (literally) static, like a painting, does not mean that it cannot exhibit a high degree of responsive cohesion since the salient features that constitute it as a painting might be highly (functionally) responsive to each other in the service of the 'whole' painting. By the same token, the fact that something is (literally) dynamic, like an awkward conversation with someone that seems always to repeat the same tired old form ('like a record'), does not mean that it necessarily exhibits any kind of responsive cohesion (indeed, the dynamical conversation I have just referred to is an example of fixed cohesion in the domain of conversation). Thus the notions of 'fixed' and 'responsive' here should not be understood as implying anything about the (literally) static or dynamic dimensions of the structures under discussion, or vice versa.

(ii) The value of responsively cohesive structures

Attempts to describe the structures of responsive cohesion, fixed cohesion, and dis cohesion in everyday terms inevitably take the form of evaluatively-laden or 'thick' descriptions. For example, depending upon the particular domain of interest in which it is manifested, examples of fixed cohesion will tend to be described in terms such as 'regimented', 'inflexible', 'dogmatic', 'rigid', 'stuck', 'frozen',

'forced', 'mechanical', 'stereotypical', 'formulaic', 'tired', or 'dead'; examples of discohesion in terms such as 'unstructured', 'chaotic', 'anarchic', 'blown apart', 'out of control', 'all over the place', 'exhausted', 'decayed', or 'dead' (lack of structure can be brought about through some kind of violent or explosive form of destruction or through decay or exhaustion; thus, the contrast between some of these terms); and examples of responsive cohesion in terms such as 'flexible', 'flowing', 'fluid', 'adaptive', 'self-organizing', 'creative', 'organic', or 'alive'. Examples of fixed cohesion also tend to be described as 'boring', because they are so predictable; examples of dis-cohesion as either 'anxiety-provoking', because they confront us with a never-ending barrage of incomprehensible change, or again, as 'boring', because they are so *predictably* unpredictable (like random noise compared with good music); and examples of responsive cohesion as 'interesting', 'engaging', or 'absorbing', because they combine a certain degree of predictability with a certain degree of surprise. It should be emphasized here that we do not simply project these reactions onto the structures concerned; rather, these reactions are a function of the intrinsic properties of these structures, for the reasons I have just noted. In this sense, then, these structures are intrinsically boring, anxiety-provoking, or interesting, and any competent, conscious observer will discover them to be so.

It seems obvious from these kinds of evaluatively-laden descriptions that responsively cohesive structures appear, in general, to be far more valuable than fixedly cohesive or dis-cohesive structures – if indeed the latter two have anything other than negative value. I will therefore refer to this claim regarding the value of responsively cohesion structure relative to the other two basic kinds of structure as the 'responsive cohesion thesis'. We could offer a long list of general reasons in support of this thesis. For example, we can, as just noted, offer good reasons for thinking that responsively cohesive structures are intrinsically interesting whereas the other two structures are not; that they offer adaptive and creative possibilities that the other two structures lack; that, depending on the context, they should be judged as having more worth, merit, importance, desirability, beauty, or usefulness than the other two structures, and always for the same reason: because of the way in which their elements or salient features 'work together', 'answer to each other', or 'fit together' to deserve the judgment under discussion; and that, on a more metaphysically inclined level, responsively cohesive structures are 'allied to life' in that they constitute the structure of living things (especially healthy living things) and imbue nonliving things with a sense of life that they would not otherwise have, whereas the other two

structures are ‘allied to death’ in that they constitute the structure of things that have no sense of life about them (in terms of the death metaphor, fixedly cohesive structures speak of rigor mortis and discohesive structures speak of either a violent ending or exhaustion and decay). Valuing those structures that most fly in the face of the universal tendency towards death, decay, and disorder seems to offer as strong a metaphysical basis on which to rest our evaluative judgments as we are likely to find.¹³ Even so, we do not necessarily need to move to this particular metaphysical level of discussion in order to secure the value of responsively cohesive structures; the other reasons I have given above are valid too – a point I will return to below.

We could pursue the responsive cohesion thesis much further across a wide range of specific domains of interest in order to show that, other things being equal,¹⁴ the examples that we value most positively turn out, again and again, to be those that most exemplify a responsively cohesive structure. (Here I am necessarily referring to ‘open’ domains of interest, by which I mean domains of interest that allow for the existence of all three structural possibilities as opposed to domains of interest in which the possibility of responsively cohesive structures has been ruled out either in principle or at a practical level.) The kinds of domains of interest I have in mind here range from theories (whether descriptive or normative), individual psychology, conversations, interpersonal relationships in general, organizational management, politics, and economics to all manner of skills (whether we are referring to trades, crafts, sports, entertainment, and so on), the written, visual, and performing arts, natural environments, gardens, architecture, urban design, and human-constructed objects in general. Thus, to cite just a single example: we generally

¹³ Goodpaster, *op. cit.*, 68, has made a similar suggestion.

¹⁴ Other things are not equal – and we modify our judgments of value accordingly – when a particular example of responsive cohesion (e.g. a deadly virus, an assassin, or an invasive species) causes certain kinds of harm to selves or other sentient beings or, especially, works against wider, contextual examples of responsive cohesion. I will briefly discuss these matters – including the kinds of priority rules that apply in these situations – in the final section of this paper. Suffice to say for now, however, that these kinds of examples do not tell against the responsive cohesion thesis but rather speak to its explanatory power when its full implications are developed; when it is advanced, in other words, from being a bare bones ‘thesis’ to a full-blown ‘theory’ (on which, see my *A Theory of General Ethics*, *op. cit.*, for the fullest expression of the ‘theory of responsive cohesion’).

consider ourselves to have good reasons for valuing a well-functioning democracy (the obvious contemporary example of responsive cohesion at the political level) more than a dictatorship (the obvious example of fixed cohesion at the political level) or lawless anarchy (the obvious example of dis cohesion at the political level). However, given the limits of this paper and the fact that I and others have pursued these kinds of more specifically targeted discussions elsewhere,¹⁵ I must settle for simply noting this point here in order to proceed with the overall argument I want to present in this paper.

The high-level concept of 'value' has multiple meanings, so what do I mean when I claim that responsively cohesive structures are far more 'valuable' than fixedly cohesive or dis cohesive structures – if indeed the latter two have anything other than negative value? Dictionary definitions of the term 'value' include, most prominently, dimensions such as 'worth', 'merit', 'importance', 'desirability', 'usefulness', and 'interestingness'. I take the responsive cohesion thesis to speak positively to all these meanings and not simply to some more philosophically refined conception of value such as the commonly employed axiological categories of 'instrumental value' or 'intrinsic value' (which, needless to say, come with problems of their own¹⁶).

¹⁵ Fox, *op. cit.*, see esp. ch. 4; Terry Williamson, Antony Radford, and Helen Bennets, *Understanding Sustainable Architecture* (London: Spon Press, 2003); Anthony Radford, 'Responsive Cohesion as the Foundational Value in Architecture', *The Journal of Architecture* **14** (2009): 511–532; Anthony Radford, 'Urban Design, Ethics, and Responsive Cohesion', *Building Research and Information* **38** (2010): 379–389; Isis Brook, 'The Virtues of Gardening', in Dan O'Brien, ed., *Gardening – Philosophy for Everyone: Cultivating Wisdom* (London: Wiley, 2010), 13–24. For examinations of the applicability of these ideas to areas such as (environmentally-oriented) aesthetics and political theory, see, respectively: John Brown, 'Responsive Cohesion and the Value of Wild Nature', paper presented to Canadian Society for Aesthetics Annual Meeting, Vancouver, June 2008: <http://www.philosophy.umd.edu/Faculty/jhbrown/RCoheion/> Hugh McCullough, 'An Examination of Warwick Fox's Notion of Responsive Cohesion and its Relevance for Environmental Theory', paper presented to the Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Vancouver, 18–20 March 2009: http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/3/1/7/4/9/p317491_index.html

¹⁶ For example, Christine Korsgaard ('Two Distinctions in Goodness', *Philosophical Review* **92** [1983]: 169–195) argues that the common distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value actually conflates two distinctions that should be kept separate (those between instrumental and final

This is a good thing too, because the fact is that these categories swim together in our most informed and considered real world evaluative judgments, with neither outweighing the other in principle. For example, even in the case of selves – the paradigmatic example of intrinsic value – many informed and considered judges would have little problem concluding that the negative instrumental value of someone like Hitler far outweighed his intrinsic value. Conversely, although functional objects are typically valued primarily for their instrumental value, a particularly well-made example (e.g. a Shaker chair) might be considered by many informed and considered judges to be at least as intrinsically valuable as it is instrumentally valuable. (To mix things up even further here, we might also want to ask if the same sense of intrinsic value is at work in this case as when we refer to selves as being intrinsically valuable.) Thus, it is false to assume either that one kind (or sub-kind) of value automatically trumps the other or to assume that certain kinds of things necessarily exemplify one kind of value more than the other. Given this mixing together of axiological categories (and sub-categories) in real world evaluative judgments, I take it to be a strength of the responsive cohesion thesis that it is held to apply *regardless* of which axiological categories turn out to underpin our most informed and considered evaluative judgments in any given instance.

5. Joining Up the Dots: Grounding a General Ethics in the Value of Selves, Sentience, and Other Responsively Cohesive Structures

What unifies my discussion of the value of selves, mere sentient beings, and mere responsively cohesive structures is the fact that they are all responsively cohesive structures. Or to put it another way, the idea of responsively cohesive structures necessarily frames my discussion of sentient beings and selves because these beings represent a subset of the class of responsively cohesive structures. But how should we conceive or picture the relationship between the value of selves and other sentient beings as revealed from the internal perspective and the value of responsively cohesive structures in

value on the one hand and intrinsic and extrinsic value on the other) and is thus an ill-posed distinction in the first place, while John O'Neill draws attention to 'The Varieties of Intrinsic Value' in his paper by that name in *The Monist* 75 (1992): 119–137.

general as revealed from the external perspective? I think it is useful to think of the kind of value revealed by the external perspective in terms of a horizontal value dimension (in which, as I will discuss, responsively cohesive structures can be nested within other responsively cohesive structures) and the kind of value revealed by the internal perspective in terms of a vertical value dimension. The latter seems appropriate because we seem naturally to gravitate to metaphors of height and depth in talking about experiential states; we speak of feeling 'low' or feeling 'high'; of being lost in the 'depths of consciousness' or of experiencing a 'heightened state of awareness'; and psychologists have, of course, drawn on the vertical metaphor for many years in their various approaches to 'depth psychology' and studies of 'peak experiences'.

But how should we connect up and, where necessary, prioritize the value that attaches not only to differently nested levels of responsive cohesion within the horizontal dimension and to beings with different kinds of experiential capacities within the vertical dimension but also to these horizontal and vertical dimensions of value in general? I will briefly consider these questions within the horizontal dimension first, the vertical dimension second, and then the integration of the two.

Reflection on the idea of responsively cohesive structures – or any kind of structure – quickly reveals that every structure exists within a wider context (short of the universe itself, perhaps; although even here, cosmologists now talk openly about our universe itself existing within a 'multiverse'). This means that we can evaluate and distinguish between the degree of both *internal* and *contextual* responsive cohesion that any particular item of interest possesses (note that by 'internal' in this context I am referring to *internal structure* rather than anything to do with an inner, experiential dimension as revealed by the *internal perspective*). It also means that even if an item of interest has an internally responsively cohesive structure (e.g. a well made chair; some compelling bars of music), this does not necessarily mean that it will be responsively cohesive with – that it will 'answer' to – any given responsively cohesive context (e.g. the otherwise responsively cohesive kitchen in which the chair might go; the otherwise responsively cohesive symphony you have nearly finished). Thus, the relationship between a structure that is responsively cohesive when considered in its own right (such as a chair or some bars of music) and its otherwise responsively cohesive possible context can itself be one of dis-cohesion. What to do? Should we privilege an individual example of responsive cohesion over contextual responsive cohesion by, say, tearing apart a kitchen or a

symphony and rebuilding or rewriting as required so that these contexts now answer to the new additions, or should we reject or primarily seek to modify the potential new additions in order to fit their pre-established responsively cohesive contexts?

If responsively cohesive structures are valuable, then the answer is obvious, and it corresponds to our common practices: we should in general give priority to contextual forms of responsive cohesion over internal, individual, or subsidiary forms of responsive cohesion. To do otherwise would be to endorse modifying a context's worth of responsive cohesion every time a new responsively cohesive item didn't fit with it. But this would amount to the functional equivalent of dis cohesion – imagine some builders tearing apart your house and rebuilding it every time something they ordered for it didn't fit; these would truly be the builders from hell. The architect Christopher Day captures the general thrust of this point quite simply when he says: 'To be harmonious, the new needs to be an organic development of what is already there, not an imposed alien'.¹⁷ That said, this priority rule needs to be understood in a responsively cohesive sense; that is, the degree of priority that is accorded to the context vis-à-vis the new item needs to be weighted according to their relative scales: it makes both common and responsive-cohesion-endorsed sense to find a mutual accommodation between potentially equal parts or contributors to something whereas obviously larger or more embracing responsively cohesive contexts should be given appropriately greater weight.

Notwithstanding the tame domestic and musical examples I have employed for the sake of illustration, this priority ordering of contextual responsive cohesion over internal, individual, or subsidiary examples of responsive cohesion has profound implications. Specifically, it means that we should give overall priority to supporting responsively cohesive structure in the largest context in which it can exist. Now for all practical, earthly purposes, this means the healthy functioning of the ecological realm in general – and here I would take not just biodiversity, but indigenous biodiversity (or 'biological integrity') to be a crucial indicator of our success or otherwise.¹⁸ Beyond this, we should seek to support responsively cohesive structures within the human realm, including, most

¹⁷ Christopher Day, *Places of the Soul: Architecture and Environmental Design as a Healing Art* (London: Thorsons/HarperCollins, 1990), 18.

¹⁸ For an enlightening discussion of the principle normative concepts in conservation biology of 'ecosystem health', 'biodiversity', and 'biological integrity', see J. Baird Callicott, Larry Crowder, and Karen Mumford,

obviously, democratic politics that are responsively cohesive with the healthy functioning of the ecological realm. And beyond this, we should create a human-constructed realm, including, most obviously, a built environment, that is responsively cohesive with the ecological realm, the human social realm, and the human-constructed realm *in that order of priority*.

We can see, then, that the concept of responsive cohesion already implies a distinction between contextual responsive cohesion on the one hand and internal, individual, or subsidiary responsive cohesion on the other, and that reflection on the relative priority that should be accorded to these forms of responsive cohesion in turn leads to what we might call a *normative theory of contexts*. This theory of contexts offers a picture of nested responsively cohesive realms in which the ecological realm encompasses the human social realm, and the latter encompasses the human-constructed realm,¹⁹ and it tells us that although we should support (preserve, create, restore) responsively cohesive structures over other kinds of structures in principle, we should do this in ways that give relatively greater priority to contextual responsive cohesion than to internal, individual, or subsidiary forms of responsive cohesion.

Let us now consider where and how the vertical dimension of value relating to selves and sentient beings fits into this picture. In terms of where it fits, the vertical vectors associated with mere sentient beings and selves are located within the ecological and human social realms, respectively. But beyond this we want to know how they fit in; how should we value – in what ways does it even make sense to value – sentient beings and selves? As I have already suggested in my earlier discussion of these beings, the evidence suggests that normally developed humans are the only selves – the only beings with autobiographical self-awareness – that currently exist on earth.²⁰ I have argued elsewhere that this has significant ethical implications,

'Current Normative Concepts in Conservation', *Conservation Biology* 13 (1999): 22–35.

¹⁹ I offer formal reasons for 'carving nature at its joints' in this way in *A Theory of General Ethics*, op. cit. In the context of that more detailed level of discussion I formally refer to the ecological, human-social, and human-constructed realms as the 'biophysical realm', the 'mindsharing realm', and the 'compound material realm', respectively.

²⁰ Chris Moore and Karen Lemmon, eds, *The Self in Time: Developmental Processes* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001); Fox, op. cit., chs 6–8; Hans Markowitsch and Harald Welzer, *The Development of Autobiographical Memory* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010).

namely, that whereas both selves and other sentient beings can be harmed by the infliction of unnecessary pain and suffering, only selves can be harmed, in addition, by the infliction of unwanted death *per se*, that is, however painless it might be.²¹ This is because only selves can, as it were, be cut off from themselves – from their own awareness of *their* existence; from their memory claims upon *their* past, *their* dreams, plans, and projects for the future, and *their* self-aware location of the present in that autobiographical context – and, thus, only selves can self-reflectively not want this to happen (or, in the case of, say, painful terminal illness, sometimes self-reflectively want this to happen). This means that unwanted death is a harm to autobiographical beings from *their* perspective and is mutually recognized as such by rational selves. In contrast, death *per se* does not cut sentient beings off from ‘their’ past, present, or future because they are not autobiographical selves; their death simply means that they die in this moment rather than that moment. What concerns them, albeit in a non-self-reflective manner, is simply (but by no means unimportantly) the quality of their moment-to-moment existence in the form of meeting their needs and avoiding pain and suffering.

If we return to the normative theory of contexts picture I suggested above, then I take the implications of these considerations to indicate some additional constraints on the ways in which we should act in those cases in which our actions affect those responsively cohesive structures that we have depicted in terms of a vertical vector, which is to say those responsively cohesive structures that possess an inner, experiential dimension. Specifically, and assuming the standard ‘other things beings equal’ kinds of clauses, we should seek to avoid inflicting unnecessary pain and suffering on sentient beings in general and we should seek to avoid causing unwanted death to selves in particular.²²

²¹ See the extended argument that runs through Fox, *op. cit.*, chs 5–8.

²² As this formulation suggests, the guidance that issues from the full-blown theory of responsive cohesion that informs this paper (for which, see Fox, *op. cit.*) is couched in agent-relative as opposed to agent-neutral terms. This theory also issues in a range of more nuanced constraints in regard to selves and other sentient beings than these two basic constraints suggest. However, I have been primarily concerned in this paper with offering a different way of approaching the main ideas in this theory to the one I offered in *A Theory of General Ethics* – couched in terms of the contrast between internal and external perspectives – and can otherwise do no more than lay out the bare bones of this theory within the limits imposed by this paper.

Warwick Fox

The considerations I have discussed here provide us with the foundations – obviously not the fine-grained details in a presentation of this length, but the foundations – of what I refer to as a General Ethics. By this I mean a single, integrated approach to ethics that encompasses the realms of human-focused ethics, the ethics of the non-human natural environment (which has been the overwhelming focus of environmental ethicists to date),²³ and the ethics of the human-constructed – or, in a broad sense of the term, built – environment. I submit that this kind of ‘joined up’ and appropriately prioritized approach to ethics represents the kind of approach that we need to be working – and acting – on at this deeply worrying point²⁴ in our intimately interwoven ecological and social history.

www.warwickfox.com

²³ I have been arguing for some time that just as the nonhuman world has constituted a major blind spot in theorizing associated with traditional, anthropocentrically focused forms of ethics, so the human-constructed environment has constituted a major blind spot in theorizing associated with the development of environmental ethics to date; see, for example: ‘Introduction: Ethics and the Built Environment’, in Warwick Fox, ed., *Ethics and the Built Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1–12; *A Theory of General Ethics*, op. cit.; ‘Architecture Ethics’, in Jan-Kyrre Berg Olsen, Stig Pedersen, and Vincent Hendricks, eds, *A Companion to the Philosophy of Technology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 387–91; ‘Developing a General Ethics (with Particular Reference to the Built, or Human-Constructed, Environment)’, in David Keller, ed., *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 213–220.

²⁴ Graham Turner, ‘A Comparison of *The Limits to Growth* with 30 Years of Reality’, *Global Environmental Change* **18** (2008): 397–411.