

## **Attending to the Full Moral Landscape: The Role of Affect in Revealing Obligations to the Other-Than-Human World**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the potential of recognizing ethical obligations to the other-than-human world. In particular, I emphasize how emotional responses to other-than-human beings reflect a proper apprehension of the moral landscape, which then allows ethical insights into our obligations towards others. Although this article overlaps with other work in environmental ethics, I specifically relate Margaret O. Little’s moral epistemology to our emotional experiences with the other-than-human to illustrate how a gestalt shift from “humans as apart from” to “humans as embedded within” complicates the moral picture of how we live with and in this world. I argue that when humans attend to our experiences with nature in an open and caring way, we can more easily and accurately ascertain the moral significance of the other-than-human parts of nature. Affective responses reveal important details of the moral landscape. Recognizing a reality of deep interrelatedness with the other-than-human world, our emotional responses to other-than-human beings enable us to appreciate moral obligations to care for the rest of nature and consider our relationality with the other-than-human world as a moral issue.

**Keywords:** eco philosophy; environmental ethics; obligations; moral epistemology; affect

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## Introduction

As human-influenced climate change and ecological destruction threaten planet Earth and all of the life-forms upon it, investigating the ways that human beings relate to the other-than-human world is of paramount importance. Although many people have experienced caring for the other-than-human, whether a companion animal, houseplant, cherished wild place, or something else, the dominant position in Western philosophical and political thought<sup>2</sup> holds that human interests prevail, and that something distinctive sets human beings apart from (and above) the environment. Whether one fully ascribes to these ideologies or not, the idea of human superiority is deeply stitched into our<sup>3</sup> cultural fabric and structure of decision-making (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 308; Simard, 2015). Even the English language enforces a distinction between “people” and the “environment,” as if the former is separable from the latter. Strengthened by this divide, our culture depends upon relationships with the other-than-human that are characterized by extraction and domination that are rapidly depleting planetary resources (Szeman, 2007; Watts, 2019). Indeed, the comfort-oriented, middle-class lifestyles that many in the global North are used to and aspire towards may be impossible without hydrocarbon-fuelled capitalism (Szeman, 2007).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, when it comes to moral philosophy, we tend to see ourselves as having moral obligations only to other humans (Frey, 1977) or perhaps to some non-human animals as well (Delon, in press; Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011).

This widespread, parsimonious view severely limits our ability to conceptualize our interdependent relationship with the rest of nature in an appropriately nuanced and caring light. We fail to recognize what we owe to the rest of nature, or even to express gratitude for the immensity of gifts and sacrifice required on the part of the other-than-human for our survival. However, the dominant paradigm of seeing the land and other living beings as resources and objects is not working: neither for us as a species nor for the planet as a whole (British Columbia Coroners Service, 2022; IPCC, 2022).

Although the anthropocentric paradigm underpins extractive industry, over-consumption, and the general degradation of the Earth and its inhabitants, not everyone experiences the rest of nature as objectified. In fact, most of humanity has had deep emotional experiences of connection with the other-than-human world (King, 2015), whether with songbirds in the backyard, the majesty of an old-growth forest, or the simple beauty of a tomato plant creating fruit. Indigenous cultures are often rooted in deeply interconnected knowledge of and relationship with the rest of nature (Ambers, 2022; Kimmerer, 2013; Russel et al., 2013). We are still able to appreciate that human beings are not separate from the rest of the world but are, in fact, members of a land-

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<sup>2</sup> Western philosophical thought is commonly associated with Aristotle, Plato, Kant, and Judeo-Christianity but is used here to also refer to ideologies widespread in the global North, including capitalism, materialism, humanism, and atheism.

<sup>3</sup> The use of “our/we” throughout this paper refers specifically to those who operate under the broad umbrella of mainstream Western thought. However, I wish to emphasize that humanity is not monolithic, and many peoples *do* recognize what humans owe to nature.

<sup>4</sup> Hydrocarbons (fossil fuels that include coal, natural gas, and crude oil) directly and indirectly fuel capitalism. For example, consumer products, transportation, and trade, as well as agricultural systems are largely dependent on fossil fuels. Furthermore, the buying and selling of hydrocarbons is key to current economic systems due to their value as investments (see Szeman, 2007).

community that includes water, soil, plants, and animals (Leopold, 1987).<sup>5</sup> Deep down, we know that humans are but one kind of being among many with which we should be able to meaningfully connect.

While researching and writing this article, my methodology was one of broad, open-ended, non-structured engagement with numerous perspectives and approaches to environmental philosophy, including Aldo Leopold’s view of environmental ethics (1987), the Deep Ecology movement (Armstrong-Buck, 1991; Drengson & Inoue, 1995), the Gaia hypothesis (Abram, 1985; Midgely, 2000), Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to the land (Kimmerer, 2013; Tully, 2023), and contemporary legal Rights of Nature theory and practice (Ambers, 2022; Hessler & Aguas, 2023). The entire process of engagement was kickstarted in the summer of 2022 by reading Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), which inspired me to imagine how Kimmerer’s weaving of Indigenous and scientific knowledge might relate to moral philosophy and environmental ethics. The more I read, the more connections I noticed, and I have attempted to draw together some emergent themes with Margaret O. Little’s 1995 essay on moral epistemology<sup>6</sup> as the main point of philosophical engagement. Little’s critical engagement with the role of affect<sup>7</sup> in attaining moral knowledge seemed important to me given our overwhelmingly personal and emotional responses to nature and environmental degradation. Especially as I mulled over Kimmerer’s focus on relationships with and reciprocity to the other-than-human world, I wondered if Little’s contributions to moral epistemology could be applied to environmental ethics.

In this article, I argue that care for the other-than-human parts of nature reflects a proper apprehension of the moral landscape and allows insight into our moral obligations towards other beings.<sup>8</sup> There is both a descriptive and a normative claim baked into this argument: 1) affect allows insight into the moral landscape, and 2) we can and should cultivate attitudes of affective openness to nature. Although I am approaching this issue from a philosophical angle, my hope is that the ideas outlined here are accessible to and resonate with a readership that ranges from sympathetic nature-lovers to skeptical analytic philosophers. I argue that Little’s uplifting of affect as necessary to moral epistemology, coupled with the idea that humans can shift our perspectives in order to recognize a different whole from the same collection of parts, provides a way for those of us with an anthropocentrically oriented moral scope to understand how caring about the other-than-human world is a moral issue. Once we can see the rest of the world in this relational light, it becomes clear that humans have obligations that extend beyond the confines of human relationships, even beyond our relationships with other animals. I then suggest what some of these obligations might be by emphasizing the role of reciprocity found in Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013). Although thoroughly investigating what our obligations might be and how we can meet them is another urgent task, the primary goal of this article is to relate Little’s moral

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper, the term “biotic community” denotes the living and non-living parts of the Earth that are woven together in complex ways to make up what we call “nature,” which includes humans. This term draws attention to the relational nature of reality. For more on the history and complexity of the “biotic community,” see Landen (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Moral epistemology refers to the study of moral knowledge and how moral agents come to possess it.

<sup>7</sup> Affect, here and in Little’s work, refers broadly to desires and emotions—ways of experiencing and interacting with the world that are *felt*.

<sup>8</sup> Although I focus on non-sentients in this article, since affective attitudes provide a particularly helpful entry point for imagining ethical relationships with the land, care and openness to non-human animals is equally important for proper moral awareness.

epistemology to our emotional experiences with nature to illustrate the way that a gestalt shift<sup>9</sup> from “humans as apart from” to “humans as embedded within” nature makes the issue of how we live with and in this world a more complicated moral picture.

### Setting the Stage

Imagine this: you have spent the better part of the day hiking through a dense coniferous forest and crossing clear streams, sharing space with squirrels, ravens, and countless other beings existing just out of view. Now, standing at the peak of a mountain along the coast, you are presented with a sweeping, panoramic view of the coastline with pulsing ocean on one side and the green-blanketed contours of smaller peaks and valleys on the other. Wind whips through your hair and the fresh, briny breeze fills your lungs. As you settle into a grassy divot, you are moved by the beauty and Beingness—the fullness of existence, in all its complexity—of the forest, the mountains, the ocean, even the clumps of moss clinging to the rocks around you. You feel connected as one finite being among a biotic community—many members of which have been on this planet longer than you and will likely continue to exist well after your energy has been dispersed back into the universe and your matter recycled into new beings. You feel almost overwhelmed with gratitude for the many gifts of nature and the simple fact of existence.

A group of people summits the peak and unpacks their lunches not far from you. Their voices carry as they talk about a forestry contract to log the western side of the mountains just across the valley. In a year or so, the forest will be pockmarked with bare patches. Acres of trees will be felled and harvested, creating needed jobs and injecting the local economy with a boost from highly valued timber. The group speculates about the possibility of this very mountain being developed—roads carved up the sides and outcroppings cleared and stabilized to make room for costly residential units. In fifty years, this whole area may be a bustling metropolis, with the most prestigious homes overlooking a busy port that stretches out into the bay. As the group of hikers continue to speak, you feel angry. Looking around at the peaks and valleys and the multitude of beings, you are almost overwhelmed with the deep feeling that it would be wrong to develop this land. You care about the variety of beings that exist in this place and want the mountain to remain healthy and whole. At the same time, you know that the trees could provide valuable building material and the streams clean drinking water. Human beings, too, need to live in this place. You feel conflicted as you attempt to balance your strong emotional resonance with this place against the knowledge that humans live in a world full of natural resources upon which we depend.

This inner turmoil is a moral dilemma: when we take our affective attitudes and responses seriously and attend to our experiences with nature in an open, caring way, it becomes easier for us to accurately ascertain the moral significance of nature. When we feel strongly about a being commonly held to be morally irrelevant (at least for its own sake)—a tree, river, or mountain, for instance—and care for it as something other than a resource or an owned object, we may begin to fully appreciate that being as something to which we have a moral obligation. This hypothesis is not to suggest that concern for the well-being of the sentient parts of nature does not also impact our feelings—indeed, care for the non-sentient parts of nature and concern for sentient beings is not mutually exclusive. By remaining open to the possibility that our experiences can introduce us

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<sup>9</sup> Zwicky (2019) defines “gestalt” as a “shape” or “form,” and its use connotes a whole that is more than the sum of its parts (p. 4).

to new ways of thinking about or feeling towards nature, we can tap into the intimate sense of connectedness and relationality endorsed by science<sup>10</sup> as well as Indigenous knowledge,<sup>11</sup> in which the borders of “us” and “them” slip.

Feelings of care and connectedness do not necessarily depend on our appreciation of other, non-moral facts about biology, ecology, or conservation but often arise from pure experience (Brown & Toadvine, 2003).<sup>12</sup> Knowledge of how forests communicate with each other (Simard, 2015) or understanding about the richness of old growth versus monocropped timber may provide reasons to appreciate nature and prompt feelings of deep care; however, factual knowledge is neither necessary nor sufficient for moral apprehension. The most aggressive resource-extractors, from multinational fossil fuel companies to Nestlé,<sup>13</sup> have access to all of the relevant scientific information about what they are destroying.<sup>14</sup> Instead, when we see a swath of forest and care deeply about it, when we feel that it would be wrong to clearcut that terrain, or when we feel rage at the pollution of a river, not simply because of its impact to humans downstream but out of concern for the river *itself*, this emotional response indicates that our gestalt has shifted to recognize the moral importance of natural beings. In this case, logging an area of forest becomes a moral dilemma in which the moral status of other-than-human beings must be considered.

### **The Role of Affect in Moral Epistemology**

In “Seeing and Caring: The Role of Affect in Feminist Moral Epistemology,” Margaret Little (1995) argued that affect “has an ineliminable role in moral epistemology” (p. 195).<sup>15</sup> Little presented the view that, in order to apprehend the salient features of the moral landscape fully and properly, reason alone does not suffice (p. 129). Even an ideal knower in possession of relevant social, psychological, and physical facts would not have complete moral knowledge if they observed the situation with a detached or uncaring perspective (p. 125). Rather, complete epistemic power includes using *feeling* to become aware of the morally relevant features of a situation, not simply observing what is happening (p. 129). Little articulated that our desires and emotions do more than assist reason in ascertaining morally relevant details and motivating us to act on moral knowledge (p. 125). Instead, we cannot have full moral knowledge without desires and emotions. Here, Little tapped into the longstanding philosophical notion that, even at the roots of the most

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<sup>10</sup> Research shows that spending time in nature is beneficial to human well-being (Bowler et al., 2010; Russel et al., 2013), and that the psychological benefits are (at least somewhat) dependent on our own intentionality while interacting with nature (Macaulay et al., 2022).

<sup>11</sup> In particular, see Ambers (2022), pp. 8–11.

<sup>12</sup> Brown and Toadvine (2003) edited a fascinating collection of essays that include insights into the methodological potential of phenomenology to influence environmental ethics.

<sup>13</sup> Nestlé is infamous for workers’ rights issues, environmental neglect, and political problems. CBC reported (2019) that Nestlé was one of the top three global plastic polluters. For more information, see Glenzain (2017).

<sup>14</sup> ExxonMobil knew for nearly half a century that burning fossil fuels would cause climate change (Rannard, 2023). Furthermore, information on the ecological harms of forestry, including habitat loss and lack of biodiversity in second-growth forests, as well as changes in how much dissolved organic matter is exported from second-growth forests in headwater ecosystems, is public knowledge (Fegel et al., 2021; Venier et al., 2014).

<sup>15</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to justify the metaethical position from which Little works. I am taking for granted, then, that some form of moral realism is true, or that there *are* such things as moral properties.

complex theoretical frameworks, morality is at its core *felt*<sup>16</sup> and elevates the role of affect to its proper position in moral epistemology.

Since at least the time of Plato (ca. 370 B.C.E./2008), affect has been contrasted with reason and viewed with suspicion when applied to sound decision-making (Singpurwalla, 2019). This devaluing of affect was especially entrenched by Enlightenment thinkers who believed in hierarchical roles for reason and affect and cast affect as a contaminating influence on our moral decision-making—something that can render our judgements and beliefs liable to distortions of sentimentality, partiality, and so forth (Little, 1995, pp. 117, 120). This prejudice persists. For example, when someone is “too emotional” their opinion may not be taken seriously, since affect is presumed to impair their judiciousness. In their scholarship on propaganda, Quaranto and Stanley (2021) have lumped “stereotypes, affect, and ... flawed ideology” together as mechanisms by which propaganda sways people in arational or irrational ways (p. 125). However, Little (1995) has argued that the role of affect in moral epistemology is indispensable.

When we look at what it takes to become *morally aware*, this particular awareness exceeds merely noting the features of a situation in an apathetic or detached manner. Instead, seeing the relevant features of a moral landscape requires “[coming] to acknowledge the salient features of a situation as constituting a *reason* or *justification* for some response” (Little, 1995, p. 126). Since moral awareness is accompanied by motivation for action<sup>17</sup> (e.g., if P believes that *x* action is morally correct, this belief provides a reason for P to do *x*), having clearly seen the moral texture of a situation provides an explanation for behaviour (p. 126). Little pointed out that if two people are faced with a moral dilemma to which one person responds while the other remains oblivious to the dilemma, they are not, properly speaking, even seeing the same situation (p. 126). In order to fully understand and respond to the morally relevant features of a situation, the agent’s affective capacities must be impacted. For example, Little contended that the difference between seeing torture as painful and seeing torture as *evil* is that the person who sees torture as evil acknowledges painfulness as a reason not to torture (p. 126). An ideal moral “knower,” then, would eschew a detached point of view through which “all is seen but nothing is cared for” and would, instead, utilize affect as a way to achieve full moral knowledge (p. 125).

If Little’s picture of the role of affect is correct and certain desires and emotions (caring, rage, empathy, sadness, love, etc.) are necessary to fully apprehend the moral landscape, then feelings of care and relationality towards the other-than-human world can be understood as affect revealing details of the full moral landscape. An empathetic response to seeing a clearcut mountain slope or plastic-choked river differs from knowing that over 15 billion trees are cut down every year (Crowther et al., 2015), or that single-use plastics are harmful to the environment (Plastic Pollution Facts, 2022), because our affective capacities are engaged and we have the potential to gain moral awareness. These feelings of sorrow, anger, care, or relationality unveil morally salient details that “pure facts” cannot convey. As stated previously, knowledge of facts may help to prompt these feelings, but we can also know such facts without caring. And when this is the case, I contend that the same type of dissociation is happening as when someone sees torture simply as

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<sup>16</sup> Hume’s assertion (1739/2002) that “Morality ... is more properly felt than judged of” (3.1.2.1) articulates the metaethical position of intuitionism and empathy for the suffering of others that underwrites the normative ethical theory of consequentialism and evidences morality’s core relationship to affect.

<sup>17</sup> Little’s argument takes for granted motivational internalism, which is beyond the scope of this article to engage with. For more on moral psychology, see Fisher (2011).

painful—the absence of an appropriate affective response renders the perception of the situation incomplete.

Accepting Little’s view of affect in moral epistemology, an affective attitude towards the non-sentient parts of nature that stirs feelings of care and relationality allows for the recognition of morally salient details. Our emotions towards nature reveal something about the moral landscape that we have hitherto neglected. I contend that this feature is the moral standing of the other-than-human world. Although we may know scientific facts about our interconnectedness with and dependence on nature, humans require emotional involvement to appreciate what this relationship means in terms of morality.

### Seeing and Shifting

Hand-in-hand with the idea of affect as a necessary condition of moral knowledge is the role of seeing. When we fail to fully perceive the moral status of a situation, it is less likely that we are able to respond appropriately. To shed light on what this perceptive ability allows, Little (1995) referenced Aristotle’s concept of the truly virtuous person, “who responds morally without struggle” due to their clear perception of what is called for by the situation (p. 127). When it comes to morality, simply observing is not enough to warrant a correct response; rather, the *quality of perception* is crucial to proper conduct. To illustrate this difference, Little suggested that we imagine an office worker who gives spare change to a homeless person every day. The worker does so not because she cares about the homeless person as an individual but to soothe her feelings of irritation at his presence, as well as to uphold her public image. Although she gives money, she does not act on a proper moral response to the situation. Little then asks the reader to imagine that one day the office worker’s perspective shifts: upon seeing the homeless person, the worker feels empathy and recognizes that she too has struggled, and when she gives him some change, she does so as an individual providing care to a fellow human being in need. Nothing has changed about the situation; there are no new details to which the office worker has become aware. Instead, what has changed is “her apprehension of the situation” (p. 127). Little wrote that “seeing more clearly is often a matter of discerning a different gestalt of the individual elements one already apprehends: one sees the elements in a way that lets one recognize some further property they together fix” (p. 127). When the office worker recognizes the humanity of the homeless person and has a compassionate response, she experiences a gestalt shift, as if she has suddenly seen a rabbit where once she saw a duck.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of shifting perspectives to recognize a different gestalt is also found in the work of phenomenologists (Abram, 1985; Brown & Toadvine, 2003) and existentialist philosophers (Murdoch, 2013; Zwicky, 2019). For example, Iris Murdoch (2013) tells a similar story to Little’s office worker in *The Sovereignty of Good* (pp. 16–17). In Murdoch’s story, a mother (dubbed M) feels hostility towards her daughter-in-law (dubbed D). This hostility is not because of any particular conflict: in fact, M thinks that D is a pleasant person. However, M finds D slightly juvenile and thinks that her son could do better in a spouse. Despite this underlying tension, M behaves properly, treating D as a part of the family and, to all outward appearances, M has no issue with D at all. One day, D and her husband move away, and M is no longer in contact with them. At first, M feels sorrow at her son’s marriage to a “silly vulgar girl,” but, over time, she comes to

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the rabbit-duck illusion, see “Duck-Rabbit illusion” (2019).

reflect on her feelings and to “give just attention” to the situation (p. 17). Murdoch wrote that M “reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters ... The change is not in D’s behaviour but in M’s mind” (p. 17). M experiences a gestalt shift from seeing her daughter-in-law as a noisy, undignified girl to a lively and spontaneous young woman. Nothing in the external world has changed; what has changed is M’s apprehension of the situation. In doing so, M can be understood to have not only recognized her moral obligation to D but to have changed reality by transforming the world into one imbued with more genuine love, therefore fulfilling her obligation to be honest and generous to her daughter-in-law.

As Little’s office worker and Murdoch’s mother-in-law illustrate, humans have the ability to redirect our affective attention in ways that result in appropriate attitudes towards particular situations. Gestalt shifts, seeing the same pieces form a new whole, are not only possible but sometimes necessary for an accurate moral epistemology. Coupling the intentional transformation of emotional engagement with Little’s assertion that emotional engagement is necessary for proper moral apprehension, our human relationships with the other-than-human world is an area in which a gestalt shift appears to be both necessary and appropriate. For example, when I shift from seeing the tree in my backyard as an object that I own and control to another living being to which I am intimately connected, my apprehension of the moral status of our relationship changes. I am no longer permitted to do whatever I please to the tree. This gestalt shift may be prompted by spontaneous feelings of connection and care or may be prompted by other factors that strengthen those pre-existing feelings. I might learn facts about how the tree and I breathe the same air (Forster, 2021), how we are connected through carbon and energy cycles (Understanding Global Change, 2020), or how the biological complexities of the tree’s life can instill feelings of care. Alternatively, such care might already be present without factual knowledge. In either case, an emotional shift is necessary to see the moral landscape with a properly holistic quality of perception. Although this gestalt shift may seem radical, it is crucial to having a proper moral epistemic stance to humanity’s continued co-existence with the biotic community.

The dominant ecological perspective in our Western context is that of anthropocentrism. Our current social practices and structures are oriented towards the interests of human beings, most often a particular group of human beings<sup>19</sup> (Strazzante et al., 2021), and seeing the natural world primarily through the lens of natural resources to use as we wish. This consumeristic view prioritizes humans by elevating our interests above the well-being of the other-than-human world—both in terms of non-human animals and the stability and proper-functioning of non-sentient beings within ecosystems (Hessler & Agua, 2023). An extractive view fails to account for our interconnectedness with the rest of the planet, and this view allows us to participate in life as if we are separate from nature. This myopic worldview props up the systems of environmental degradation and domination that contribute to environmental catastrophes, including climate change and mass extinction.

British philosophy professor Mary Midgely (1985, 2000) and American environmentalist and philosopher Aldo Leopold (1987) have both drawn attention to the fallacy of bifurcating the world into us (humans as rational agents) and them (objects and animals considered inferior subjects to humans). Furthermore, Midgely and Leopold have advocated abandoning this

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<sup>19</sup> The Global North contributes disproportionately to emissions while the Global South bears the brunt of the damage caused by climate change. A WEIRD (White, European, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) population, then, is the primary benefactor of ecological destruction. The benefits are even more unevenly distributed among those in the most privileged demographics: male, straight, cisgendered, and able-bodied, especially.



perspective to appropriately expand our care and consideration beyond the human community. In “Persons and Non-Persons,” Midgley (1985) pointed out that what makes humans deserving of care and consideration is not simply our shared language but our “emotional fellowship” (p. 62). If this justificatory picture is the case, then when humans experience emotional fellowship with animals, trees, rivers, or rocks, there is no reason for us to write-off these experiences as something unrelated to our shared planetary existence and relationality. In her explanation of the philosophical implications of the Gaia Hypothesis<sup>20</sup> and the scientific basis for understanding our interconnectedness with the rest of nature, Midgley (2000) proposed that

... direct concern about the destruction of the natural world is still a natural, spontaneous feeling within us, and one that we no longer have reasons to suppress. We know ... that we are closely akin to a whole continuum of other life forms ... we are not pure intellects. (p. 40)

We naturally care about other beings because we know that humans are not distinct from nature—we are as much a part of the system of existence as a fern or a stream.

Similarly, Leopold suggested that we ought to see ourselves as members of the biotic community, rather than as its conquerors. Humans are ecologically embedded beings and recognizing this embeddedness is a key part of Leopold’s ideological vision. The core idea in “The Land Ethic” developed and defended by Leopold (1987) is that “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (pp. 224–225). This core idea finds support in recognizing the role of affect in properly appreciating the moral landscape. Leopold also wrote that obligations “have no meaning without conscience, and the problem we face is the extension of social conscience from people to land” (p. 209). Just as Leopold asserted that humans can only act ethically in relation to what we can “see, feel, love, understand, or otherwise have faith in” (p. 214), embracing these feelings as epistemically valuable grounds the need for ethical action. Undergoing a gestalt shift from seeing the other-than-human world as a catalogue of natural resources and inanimate substances to an entity with which we have a relationship and therefore care about provides an alternative way forward. Although the problem remains that a cultural gestalt shift is a challenge, mounting evidence that this shift is morally appropriate lends legitimacy to the conclusion that the obligations revealed through our affective interactions with the other-than-human are important.

Drawing on Murdoch’s and Little’s illustrations of gestalt shifts, I contend that an affective attitude that reveals the moral significance of our relationship to nature is something that humans can and should nurture. For instance, when we plant a garden, we could see the tomato plant as a (living) object, one that we may not want to kill for prudential reasons, or we could see the plant as a being with which we have a relationship that generates certain moral obligations for us to care for the plant beyond the prudential reasons offered by good gardening practice (i.e., to grow food). For many, looking at an ancient, awe-inducing Douglas Fir stirs feelings of respect, admiration, and care. Many speak non-hyperbolically of loving relationships with other-than-human beings, from a particular tree to a whole region or specific natural feature. We also speak about loving

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<sup>20</sup> The Gaia Hypothesis emphasizes that living things and the planet are deeply interrelated and interdependent. The Gaia school of thought began with James Lovelock’s observation (1975) that Earth’s atmosphere is consistently in a state of disequilibrium, perhaps produced by life on Earth as a *necessary condition*. The Gaia Hypothesis conceptualizes of the planet as a living being or “coherent, self-sensing, autopoietic entity” (Abram, 1985, p. 97).

non-human companion animals. These same emotions allow us to properly apprehend the morally relevant features of clearcutting a forest or damming a river. If we accept Little’s view, these feelings are not simply sentimental emotions clouding the prudential reasons for harvesting a tree for lumber but represent an appropriate moral epistemic stance. That said, there is no reason for these feelings to be constrained to something recognizably majestic, like a powerful river. By embracing and nurturing feelings of care to develop affective openness to the other-than-human world, in time we might come to recognize less grandiose beings as equally deserving of respect. For example, when we move a banana slug off a trail and into the foliage while out on a hike, express gratitude towards plants before harvesting, or allow the bathroom spiders to spin their webs in peace, we enter into a paradigm of relationality by recognizing ourselves as ecologically embedded and dependent on a host of beings.

### **A Possible Objection**

At this point, it might be contended that, if humans care about non-sentient nature, Little’s view gives us recourse to believe these emotions are morally relevant. But even if affect is necessary for moral epistemology, what is it about non-sentient nature that makes it *deserving* of care? I will simply point out that if affect is indeed a necessary condition for proper moral apprehension, then approaching the other-than-human world with an openness to affect seems normative if we care about having a proper moral epistemic stance. What if someone approaches a tree with affective openness and only experiences it as a potential firewood source? Accepting that care for nature might “clue us in” to the moral relevance of its non-sentient parts does not mean that everyone automatically experiences nature as something to be in relationship with. This sort of paradigm shift takes time and is predicated on an openness that does not come easily to everyone. As Jan Zwicky (2019) writes in *The Experience of Meaning*, “there’s usually no technique or method for precipitating a given gestalt” (p. 17). Instead we are tasked with discovering how we might be able to shift our perspective. Learning more about our planetary ecosystems from a variety of sources and perspectives, including sciences (Bowler et al., 2010; Forster, 2021; Macaulay et al., 2022; Simard, 2015), spiritual traditions/practices (King, 2015; Sanford Beck, 2015), Indigenous ways of knowing that centre relationality, obligations, and reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2013; Tully, 2023),<sup>21</sup> and environmental philosophy (Abram, 1985; Armstrong-Buck, 1991; Brown & Toadvine, 2003; Delon, in press; Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011; Drengson & Inoue, 1995; Hessler & Aguas, 2023; Leopold, 1987; Midgley, 1985, 2000) can all aid in fostering an appropriate openness to seeing the world in a different way. After all, it is hard to care about something we do not know, and it is harder still to be in relationship with something we do not care about.

Once we come to appreciate the moral landscape as including other-than-human beings to whom we have obligations, the pressing question becomes, “What are these obligations?” In anticipation of further objections, two things strike me as important to articulate at this point. First, the kind of moral obligations to which I refer are not identical to the moral obligations that adult humans have to each other. It is not the intent of this article to argue that the non-sentient (or

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<sup>21</sup> For an exploration of how relationality informs Indigenous ways of knowing and governance, see Ambers (2022) and Tully (2023). For more information on reciprocity and relationality in general, see Kimmerer (2013).

sentient) parts of nature are rational agents.<sup>22</sup> That is, I do not wish to argue here that a moral obligation to a plant carries the exact same features (and limits) as a moral obligation to one's spouse. It is beyond the scope of this article to delineate the limits of moral obligations to other-than-human parts of nature. However, the relationship between humans and, say, a tree is distinct from the relationship between two humans, and to suggest that we cannot cut down trees, just as we cannot murder humans, would be a fallacious straw person. Spelling out how conflicts between competing moral claims are to be resolved is a matter of profound theoretical and practical importance that I must leave to the future. Second, and relatedly, what follows is not a comprehensive articulation of what our obligations are nor how to satisfy them. It may be the case that although I have moral obligations to a tree, I also have obligations to my family. The fact that sometimes obligations must be overridden does not suggest that they do not exist in the first place (Armstrong-Buck, 1991). Developing a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding moral obligations to the other-than-human world—especially in terms of how to adjudicate conflicting claims—is beyond the scope of this article. What I want to suggest is that there is a moral dimension to our interactions with nature that deserves consideration.

## Obligations

Humans have many reasons to protect nature and care about the environment that do not involve recognizing the moral status of the other-than-human world. Climate change and environmental degradation are pressing issues that impact human well-being, and this oncoming crisis gives us substantial reasons to care about the conservation and protection of nature. In a similar vein, our human needs and interests can compel us to protect and preserve nature. If I heat my home with a wood-burning stove, I have prudential reasons to care about the health of the woodlot. If I grow a garden, I have prudential reasons to care about soil health and clean water. However, there are other types of obligations operating alongside these reasons. Our affective responses cue us in to the moral relevance of other-than-human beings and reveal obligations that are not solely related to human interests. Therefore, we have a general obligation to engage with the other-than-human world in a new way.

Although there are many promising areas of exploration into what our moral obligations to the other-than-human world might be, including substantial work on the Rights of Nature (Ambers 2022; Hessler & Aguas, 2023) and enshrining legal protections, my focus is the personal, and so I want to suggest personal obligations that are overlapping and complementary. One obligation to the other-than-human world is to learn about it. It is all too easy to go through life with minimal knowledge of the multitude of beings with which we share space. Reductionist, mechanistic thinking has reduced the vast majority of nature to “objects” instead of subjects (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 42). However, when we truly recognize the rest of the world as something alive, as something that we are a part of and not separate from, this relationality means that we ought to learn about our fellow biotic citizens on a more personal level. What kind of spiders are weaving webs in the bathroom? What kind of ferns are growing on the path beside the trail? If responsible moral epistemology includes an affective dimension, then we need to be aware of and emotionally

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<sup>22</sup> That said, as Ambers (2022) pointed out, arguments against the personhood of natural actors on the basis of rationality are often founded on the “ontological assumption that human beings are the dominant rational beings” (p. 14). Discounting the rationality, agency, or personhood of other-than-human beings on the grounds of dissimilarity to human beings is an anthropocentric fallacy, and non-human agency/rationality is an important area to explore.

involved with the other-than-human world around us to appropriately respond to our moral responsibilities.

Education and attentiveness are important obligations, but perhaps the most pragmatic obligation that humans have to the other-than-human world is conservation and protection. If I notice that the plum tree in my backyard that I have cultivated a relationship with is being eaten by aphids, a proper moral response would be to take steps to protect that tree from being killed.<sup>23</sup> Although conservation and land-management are often associated with an anthropocentric outlook, there is no need for our protection of trees, rivers, mountains, and fish to be a solely prudential concern—something that we have to do if we want to be able to use lumber, enjoy clean drinking water, and prevent climate collapse. These reasons may still apply, but once we have shifted our perspective on the other-than-human world, we reveal a more obvious moral dimension to these actions. After all, when we care about someone, wanting to protect that person for their own sake follows naturally. There may not be a perfect symmetry between human-to-human obligations and our obligations to the biotic community, but the connection between care and protection seems natural.

A third obligation that falls from properly apprehending the features of the moral landscape is “find[ing] a way to enter into reciprocity” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 238). In *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), Kimmerer emphasizes reciprocity as a way of interacting with the other-than-human world. As she leads readers through a rich terrain of biology, Indigenous knowledge, and personal stories, the idea that we are a part of an interdependent and interrelated system is firmly asserted. This notion is not simply presented as a scientific fact, although it is that, but also as a characterization of a relationship with the other-than-human world. This relationship is something that we should not take for granted but recognize and appreciate as we live out our human lives among other beings. Time and time again, Kimmerer (2013) has written about gratitude and reciprocity as ways of being in right relationship with the rest of nature. The idea of reciprocity and reciprocal relationships, though it may stretch the imagination to understand outside the confines of typical human relationships, is something common not only to Kimmerer’s work but to Indigenous ways of relating to the land more broadly. For example, Andrew Ambers (2022) highlighted the cultural and legal importance of seeing other-than-human parts of nature as “embedded in relationships that are built upon the principle and practices of respect, dignity, and reciprocity” present in ‘Nāmgis, Heiltsuk, and WSÁNEĆ traditions (p. 16). But this kind of reciprocity is an obligation not a given. The idea of reciprocal relationships with other-than-human nature is sometimes counterintuitive, since we may have a much clearer idea of how human beings benefit from sentient and non-sentient parts of nature (Russel et al., 2013), but it may be much less clear how we benefit those beings in return. Distinguished Canadian philosopher and professor emeritus James Tully (2023) acknowledged that humans can “refuse to reciprocate” by simply being beneficiaries of other-than-human nature in a one-sided relationship (p. 6). Here, Indigenous knowledge and ways of being with the land provide a rich entry-point to imagining how reciprocal relationships might function (Kimmerer, 2013). Humans are tasked with developing reciprocal relations. However challenging it may seem, resisting exploitative ways of being by finding ways

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<sup>23</sup> It is possible that by doing so I would have to kill the aphids that are threatening the plum tree, which might be seen as neglecting my obligation to those aphids. If that concern arises, then I am seeing the moral landscape in the correct way. As previously mentioned, this paper does not aim to provide substantial advice on adjudicating competing claims. I simply, and perhaps frustratingly, assert that moral dilemmas are more common than we would like to admit.

to enter into reciprocity is a key obligation revealed through and validated by our affective responses to other-than-human beings.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that attending to our emotional experiences with nature in an open way allows us to see the moral landscape more clearly and to appreciate the moral significance of the other-than-human parts of nature. When we respond to a tree, mountain, or plant in the garden, and we care for it as something with which we have a relationship that is deeper than subject-object, we can come to fully appreciate that being as entangled in the moral landscape. Upon recognizing a gestalt of deep interrelatedness with the other-than-human world, our emotional responses to other-than-human beings reveal moral obligations to care for the rest of nature and consider our relationality with the other-than-human world as a moral issue.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) admitted that “the philosophy of reciprocity is beautiful in the abstract, but the practical is harder” (p. 238), but who said morality is easy? Even among human relations in which we can more easily communicate and understand each other’s desires, interests, and relationships, understanding morality and providing ethical frameworks is far from straightforward. Why should it be any easier when dealing with as vast and diverse a community as the rest of nature? The obligation to find ways to enter into reciprocity, to give back as well as to take, may sound impossible, or perhaps simply foolish, but if we are to take seriously the idea that affect clues us into the important moral standing of beings beyond humanity, it becomes imperative. Gratitude, conservation, education, broadening our affective attention, and striving to foster caring relationships with the other-than-human world are good starting points.

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