4 Subjectivist Theories of Intrinsic Value

In Chapter 2, it was argued, provisionally, that in order to fulfil the function required of it, namely underwriting an environment based, as opposed to a human or sentient based, ethic, the concept of intrinsic value needed to incorporate two features. Firstly, intrinsic value needs to be non-instrumental in the sense that it does not derive from, and depend for its existence on, the goals, purposes, and projects of human beings (indeed, of sentient creatures in general). At least some of the value of the natural environment must be independent of the role it can play in furthering human purposes, or the purposes of sentient creatures in general. Without this condition, an environment based ethic would collapse into a human or sentient based ethic, an ethic of environmental management. Secondly, it was argued that, at least at first glance, intrinsic value must be objective. At least some of the value of the natural environment must be independent of attitudes of approval, or disapproval, indeed, independent of mental properties in general. Without this condition, the concept of intrinsic value would not be able to satisfy one of the central motivations for its introduction: the protection of the environment in the face of human (or sentient) indifference, or even hostility, towards it. In accordance with these two desiderata, the previous chapter examined the prospects for an objectivist theory of environmental value. However, the central problem with objectivism – the problem of arbitrariness – requires for its resolution that we travel in the direction of, and almost certainly over the border into, subjectivism. Thus, the most plausible version of objectivism turns out almost certainly to not be a version of objectivism at all. And even if it is, this version takes us no further than biocentrism: the value of nature is life. Life is intrinsically valuable, and this value derives from the valuing by a living creature of itself. On this view, however, anything that is not alive
cannot have intrinsic value. And this excludes many core environmental structures, notably species and ecosystems. And, to many environmentalists, this is unacceptable. Indeed, in the eyes of many, it is structures such as species and ecosystems, as opposed to individual organisms, that are the primary bearers of value. So, it is time to examine if we can do better than a biocentric account.

The biocentric account of environmental value avoided the problem of arbitrariness by accepting that the value of the environment must derive from its being valued by someone or something. And this valuing consisted in a relation that a living organism bears to itself. The intrinsic value of the living organism, that is, derives from its valuing itself non-instrumentally. It is possible, however, for a living, valuing, organism to value things other than itself; in particular, it might value species and ecosystems. Of course, if we regard the value of these things as deriving purely from their being valued by something else, then we have not probably but definitely abandoned an objectivist model of environmental value in favour of a subjectivist one. However, some environmental philosophers have argued that this is quite acceptable. The need for the second condition on the concept of intrinsic value, the objectivity condition, has been challenged. The basis of this challenge is that all the work required of intrinsic value can be accomplished simply by accommodating the first condition, that of non-instrumentality. This idea has received probably its most influential and complete theoretical articulations in the work of J. Baird Callicott and Robert Elliot. This chapter provides a critical evaluation of their arguments.

4.1 Elliot's indexical model of intrinsic value

Robert Elliot has developed what he calls an indexical theory of intrinsic value.\(^1\) This theory is subjectivist in that it makes the value of the environment dependent on certain mental properties of human beings. However, Elliot also claims that his account of value is non-instrumentalist, in that it does not make the value of the environment consist solely in its role in furthering human purposes, and realist, in the sense that it makes at least some statements about environmental value true. And this, Elliot argues, is sufficient to underwrite the core claims of environmental ethics. This section outlines Elliot's theory.

Objects, states of affairs, events, processes, actions etc. can, according to Elliot, all possess intrinsic value. If they do so, however, they will do so in virtue of possessing some other properties, which Elliot calls value