

# The Consequences of Enactivism on Moral Considerability in Environmental Ethics

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**Abstract** Enactivism is a model of cognition that emphasises the dynamic interactions between organisms and their environment. This paper analyses the link between holism and individualism in animal and environmental ethics through the conceptual tools provided by the enactivist programme, particularly through a perspective of relational values emerging from the dynamic interactions of organisms with the environment. In our opinion, the more dynamic concept of value that enactivism implicitly offers can be helpful in resolving conflicts within green ethics. Concurrently, its reconceptualization of agency in simple organisms contributes to the discourse on the attribution of moral consideration to non-human entities. These insights have implications for both the moral deliberation of the individual agent and decisions taken at the political level. We briefly address the associated philosophical and practical challenges in ethical deliberations.

**Keywords** Enactivism. Environmental ethics. Animal ethics. Holism. Relational Value.

**Summary** 1 Introduction – Reconciling Individualist and Holistic Ethical Perspectives in Animal and Environmental Ethics. – 2 Rethinking Ethical Interconnectedness: Nature, Animals, and Us. – 3 Supporting Arguments: A Relational Approach To Value for Navigating a Complex Scenario. – 4 Counterarguments: Ethical Complexity and Assumptions. – 5 Conclusions.



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## **1 Introduction – Reconciling Individualist and Holistic Ethical Perspectives in Animal and Environmental Ethics**

### **1.1 The Dichotomy: Individualist vs. Holistic Approaches**

Attempts to explain and systematise human morality are often characterised by marked differences on the meta-ethical level. Different concepts upstream have an inevitable influence on the normative level and, ultimately, on practical deliberation. Diverse systems rely on various epistemic foundations. For instance, moral objectivism presupposes ontological commitment to the existence of moral facts. Meta-ethical orientations shape the contours of ethical dialogue. It is undisputed that the specific set of foundational philosophical assumptions that underpin ethical reasoning provides a heuristic framework, influencing the epistemological, ontological, and practical dimensions of moral life. Part of what we want to develop in this essay has to do with metaethics, but not everything. The issues related to the attribution of intrinsic value, which is one of the fundamental nodes of many disputes in the field of animal and environmental ethics, will be tangentially analysed. Generally, this concept is defined as “something that has value in itself”, independent of external factors, not-instrumental (O’Neill 1992). The contrast we will analyse between holists and individualists in fact rests on two different concepts of intrinsic value.

In proposing a third way, one of the arguments we will explore here is how enactivism can challenge the notion of intrinsic value as a fixed attribute, proposing it instead as a co-emergent property resulting from ongoing interactions between organisms and the environment. This perspective, in our opinion, allows for a more dynamic and context-dependent understanding of what is valued and why.

### **1.2 The Divide Between Individualism and Holism**

Speaking of different meta-ethical assumptions and their consequences, one of the starting points of this paper is that different positions in environmental ethics and animal rights (such as holism and individualism) are also based, among other things, on distinct meta-ethical assumptions. Few areas have generated such intense disagreement as the fields of animal and environmental ethics (Campbell 2018). This debate stems from fundamentally divergent perspectives on the nature and location of moral value in the context of environmental concerns. In recent years, the need for a philosophical understanding of our species’ responsibilities towards the natural world and its inhabitants has made the profound tension between holistic and individualist perspectives become clear (Faria, Paez 2019).

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Individualist ethics prioritises the interests and intrinsic value of individual entities (generally animals but, in principle, could also be plants or other organisms) (Andreozzi 2015; Mikkelsen 2018; Allegri 2020). Philosophers such as Tom Regan and Peter Singer have famously championed the rights and interests of individual animals, challenging us to recognise and respect their sentience and intrinsic value (Andreozzi 2015; Villanueva 2018; Allegri 2020). Individualist ethics, in this context is primarily concerned with the welfare and rights of individual living beings, often emphasises the moral consideration of animals on the basis of attributes such as sentience or the ability to suffer.

In contrast, holistic ethics emphasises the interconnectedness of nature, suggesting that moral standing does not reside in individual entities, but in collective wholes, such as species, ecosystems or even the biosphere. In this case, the moral concern is for the broader patterns and processes of nature, rather than for isolated entities (De Souza, Tharakan 2017; Callicott 1988). Proponents of holistic ethics argue for the primacy of the ecological whole, emphasising the interconnectedness and interdependence of natural systems.

This essay delves into the intricate landscape of these ethical divisions and attempts to contribute in the direction of harmonising them. We will focus in particular on the question of moral considerability and how the enactivist perspective can lend a hand in the search for an alternative between conflicting axiologies.

### 1.3 Bridging the Gap: Efforts at Reconciliation and Their Implications

These perspectives, both centred around a ‘green sensibility’, often clash. Many have tried to reconcile them, yet some label these efforts futile.

Those in favour emphasise the interdependence between organisms and ecosystems, proposing hybrid models where moral consideration is not dichotomous. These include mediating different values (Aaltola 2005), hierarchizing them with an extension of the domain of morality on a concentric basis (De Anguita, Alonso, Martin 2008; Callicott 1988). There are also ‘secular’ attempts prioritizing practical over theoretical aspects in animal and environmental ethics.

Critics of reconciliation, argue for the incommensurability of the values (Faria, Paez 2019) and stress the importance of a solid theoretical framework in order to be able to motivate action effectively. They caution against theoretical dilutions or compromises, considering a solid philosophical foundation essential to ensure precise practical interventions.

Remaining on a formally very general level, which inevitably simplifies the complexity of the issue, those in favour of a reconciliation argue that the two ethical frameworks are not mutually exclusive and can indeed be integrated to address different aspects of our moral obligations towards animals and the environment. Many view the animal-environmental ethics division as overstated or a “false problem” (Jamieson 1998). In the now landmark “Animal Liberation is an Environmental Ethic”, Jamieson, for example, presents an integrated theory, stating that the value of animals and the environment can go hand in hand.

The idea is that by recognizing species-ecosystems connections, an ethical stance acknowledging both individual and collective value is possible. As an alternative to this, various forms of moral pluralism have been proposed (Palmer 2013), although the problem of the division between holism and individualism arises again whenever a conflict between different values is found (Palmer 2013) and for this reason, according to some, the basic principles of animal and environmental ethics are intrinsically incompatible (Faria, Paez 2019). There’s concern that reconciling these ethics might weaken their core principles, leading to an approach that fails to adequately address the concerns of either camp.

The differences between these research agendas are decidedly significant: individualist ethics often relies on an ontology of individual beings with distinct boundaries and intrinsic value, holistic ethics introduces a more relational ontology in which value emerges from intricate networks of relationships and systemic dynamics (Andreozzi 2015; Allegri 2020). The different positions in this broad research landscape rest on different worldviews. A quick example (which we will elaborate on later) of incompatibility is found in scenarios involving invasive species. From an individualist ethical point of view, every animal, including members of an invasive species, has an intrinsic value that justifies protection. However, holistic environmental ethics could support the removal of these species in order to preserve the integrity of the ecosystem while prioritising the collective well-being of the ecological community. These are two different axiologies that, as we have mentioned, for many authors are irreconcilable on a theoretical level (Faria, Paez 2019) while, for many others, a rigid application of a single value system is inapplicable to such issues due to their complexity (Weston 2013).

Literature review reveals a considerable number of scientific articles that address the relationship between the two disciplines (Rolston 2022). Interest in this topic seems to have been on the rise over the past few years, in accordance with a trend that could be attributed to the recognition of the interconnectedness between the two, which prompts scholars to explore potential theoretical reconciliations. The emerging awareness within the public debate of the

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need for a holistic and integrated approach to ethical engagement with animals and the environment has probably contributed to the expansion of the literature (Schlottmann, Sebo 2018; Bilchitz 2019).

However, the reconciliation of holistic and individualist perspectives in animal and environmental ethics is far from being a mere academic exercise. It cannot simply consist in the merging of two schemes, but in carefully and critically forging a new path that captures the essence of both and addresses their limitations. The urgency of this reconciled approach is underlined by the growing environmental crises (Taylor 2009). From climate change to biodiversity loss, the stakes of our ethical decisions have tangible consequences for both individual organisms and entire ecosystems.

Developing this reconciliation could benefit both these disciplines (as it would allow them a broad approach to different kinds of practical issues and a more effective management of competing but somewhat overlapping values) and society as a whole (which could benefit from integrated and consistent policies). Regardless of the possibility of defining this issue definitively, it is quite evident that a rapprochement between holistic and individualist perspectives would bring tangible benefits. Such a reconciliation could provide the theoretical foundation for the formulation of ethical guidelines capable of providing a conceptual framework for decision-making in a variety of fields, from agriculture to tourism, taking into account both the environment and the needs of human and non-human individuals.

## **2 Rethinking Ethical Interconnectedness: Nature, Animals, and Us**

### **2.1 Bridging Holism and Individualism Through Enactive Agency**

So, we are attempting a reconciliation. More precisely, we are attempting a reconciliation between holism and individualism that passes through the redefinition of the human and animal mind and, consequently, through a new image of the moral agent.

Specifically, this path is offered to us by enactivism, a research programme or, more ambitiously in Shaun Gallagher's words, "a philosophy of nature" with significant implications for the scientific investigation of the mind. Enactivism goes beyond being a mere research methodology. In its most recent interpretations, it stands as a genuine philosophical framework that draws on pragmatism, phenomenology and cognitive science (Gallagher 2017). Among its most distinctive features, enactivism redefines agency by emphasising the embodied dimensions of perception and cognition of moral facts (Zahidi 2014; Maiese 2018).

One of the central concepts of this approach is that of ‘autopoietic system’, a term developed by Maturana and Varela (1991), referring to a self-creative entity capable of maintaining and reproducing itself, demonstrating a form of self-sufficiency and autonomy. Among other things, it is precisely this updated definition of autonomy that, in our opinion, may be relevant for the attribution of value in environmental and animal ethics.

More generally, the enactivist approach contrasts with the classical models of cognitive science, which treat cognition in terms of internal mental states (Zahidi 2014) and symbolic representations of information received from sensory inputs.

Models pertaining to the enactivist perspective, building upon the foundational work of De Jaegher and Di Paolo on the concept of participatory sense-making (2007), emphasise the dynamic interactions between organisms and their environments and the role of thinking beings as primarily acting beings (Reid, Mgombelo 2015; Maiese 2018). Organisms are seen as self-creating systems, with cognition deeply rooted in their ongoing survival. In essence, bodies are not just passive tools through which our brains operate, but are an integral part of how we think, perceive and act in the world. For instance, consider how a bird’s body is not just a vessel for its brain but is integral to how it navigates its environment, finds food, and interacts with other birds. The embodiment is crucial in understanding the bird’s (ethical?) standing in environmental and animal ethics. This concept emphasizes the interactive process through which agents, be they human or non-human, engage in shaping their understanding and interaction with the world. In this context, moral action arises from the dynamic interaction between an embodied agent and its environment, rather than being determined exclusively by internal mental states or abstract moral principles (Heras-Escribano, Noble, de Pinedo 2013; Van Grunsven 2018). To say this is to posit that value is inherently relational, grounded in the active engagement and interdependence of living beings within their ecological niches. In short: recognising a situation as morally salient motivates us to perform certain types of actions. From an enactivist perspective, living beings are autopoietic systems that maintain their identity through dynamic interactions with the environment. Agency, therefore, becomes a question of how effectively an organism can navigate and adapt to its environment to maintain its viability. Indirectly this implies that perception is not just a passive reception of information but is intrinsically linked to action (Zahidi 2014; Maiese 2018; Van Grunsven 2021). Those facts are relevant for two different reasons.

- a. First, because at the metaethical level it allows us to introduce a more flexible system for dealing with possible clashes between individualist and holistic values: if the attribution of value is situated in a dynamic context, there is no need to

adhere rigidly to one approach over another. Shifting deliberative questions related to the moral considerability of individuals or ecosystems to this level allows for greater flexibility with a view to a pluralism that can nevertheless be said to be non-arbitrary and based on strong contextual elements.

In this context, moral considerability refers to the quality or status of being worthy of ethical consideration. In environmental ethics, this consideration traditionally extends beyond human beings to include non-human entities such as animals, plants, ecosystems, and even geological formations. It suggests that these entities have moral significance and thus deserve ethical consideration in our decisions and actions. By considering the specific context and possibilities that shape an individual's actions, enactivism offers a less implicitly value-laden analysis of moral behaviour (Van Grunsven 2021). Values and norms arise from the purposes and goals of organisms as they navigate and interact with their environment. In this light, living beings are not passive receivers of value but active participants in generating it through their engagements with the world. This dynamic view can also have very concrete implications in practice, emphasising the importance of engaging with others and participating in the ongoing co-constitution of ethical reality, which is fundamental in a complex and multi-perspective context such as the issues addressed by animal and environmental ethics.

- b. Enactivism makes it possible, by suggesting that relatively "simple" organisms can be regarded as possessing "agentivity", to consider animal intelligence differently (Zipoli Caiani 2022). This fact, as much of the literature on the normative consequences of studies on animal cognition attests (Petrus, Wild 2013; Allen, Bekoff 2007), has undoubted relevance for the attribution of moral status. If we assert that genuine agency derives from the ability to consistently fulfil the requirements for the survival of a biological system, it can be said that there are many beings that possess it, and this fact may be relevant should we decide to use this information to ascribe moral status to them. These kinds of dynamic and wider definitions can also apply to 'organisms' in a broader sense. Take, for example, a coral reef. From a certain perspective, the coral reef is an autopoietic system in which every organism, from small polyps to fish, contributes to and maintains the overall health and identity of the system through dynamic interactions. Whose moral interest is to be considered here? The coral reef or the organisms that make it up? Both? The point is to get out of dichotomous thinking when it comes to deliberation in these matters. In our opinion, considering a new concept of agency allows us to move in this direction.
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To sum up: we argue that the shift to a more embodied understanding of cognition and morality allows for a more nuanced handling of ethical dilemmas in animal and environmental ethics. Enactivism facilitates a flexible and context-sensitive approach to moral deliberations, allowing for a more balanced consideration of individualist and holistic values. By advocating a dynamic ethical framework in which value attribution is not fixed, but evolves with changing contexts and interactions, we intervene in the ongoing debate between individual rights and collective ecological well-being.

## 2.2 Interconnected Ethos: Enactivism's Holistic Link Between Environmental and Animal Ethics

Developing point (a): an enactivist perspective redefines moral decision-making through the idea of a shared implementation of an axiological domain. In this view, intrinsic value is not independent of human interests and needs, but rather emerges through the enaction process.

Konrad Werner and Magdalena Kiełkiewicz-Werner (2022) in their article "From Shared Enaction to Intrinsic Value. How Enactivism Contributes to Environmental Ethics" propose precisely to consider natural environments (broadly defined) as axiological domains that have gradually emerged during evolution. Such domains involve entities capable of solving complex problems in their environments and are characterised by relatively stable patterns of value balancing. Considering the definition of agency we provided earlier, the emergence of these domains is not limited to human beings, but includes a wider range of organisms, up to and including the entire biosphere.

Implicitly, this suggests that enactivist perspectives can contribute to our understanding of intrinsic value and its relationship to human-environment interactions. Simply put: enactivism provides, according to the authors, a framework for understanding how our interactions with the environment shape our perceptions and ethical judgements. It emphasizes that understanding and responding to our environment is an active, reciprocal process, integral to shaping our cognitive and moral frameworks.

To summarise point (b): enactivism can inform animal ethics by emphasising the greater dignity of the embodied and situated experiences of animals and the ethical implications this may have on our interactions with them. Although implicitly, enactivism may allow for a more radical challenge than other perspectives to the traditional view that animals are mere objects or resources for human use, and at least theoretically allows for consideration of their subjective experiences and welfare. This is implied in the possibility of recognising animals as active agents in their own right and thus potentially capable of participating in ethical relationships. Any being that actively

engages with and influences its environment can be considered, at least, a moral patient, thus expanding the traditional boundaries of ethical consideration. From this, of course, it does not follow that they should also be considered agents in a moral sense, but it does provide us with additional reasons to pay attention to and respond to the lived experiences and intentional expressions of non-human beings.

The idea is that by integrating enactivism into environmental and animal ethics, it is possible to develop a more holistic and inclusive approach that takes into account the complex interactions between humans, the environment and other living beings. In essence, the agency of all beings within an ecosystem is acknowledged, attempting to offer a more balanced and inclusive framework for environmental ethics than one based only on 'high' characteristics in an anthropocentric sense.

Both enactivism and the goal of reconciling animal and environmental ethics are grounded in interconnectedness. Recognising the intrinsic relationship between organisms and their environment aligns well with the holistic approaches of environmental ethics and the individual considerations of animal ethics. If successful, this venture could bridge the gap between individual and collective value assessments. Rather than dividing value into intrinsic or instrumental, a green and enactivist ethics would focus on relational dynamics, emphasising the co-emergence of value from the organisms-environment interactions. Ethical principles, in this view, would not be seen as static guidelines, but as evolving constructs shaped by real-world interactions and challenges. By viewing ethics as emerging from our intertwined relationship with the world, enactivism can inspire a more holistic and integrated approach to our moral responsibilities towards both individual organisms and the ecosystems they inhabit. Models like this allow a deeper understanding of social life and care practices, emphasising the dynamic interdependent processes that give rise to an embodied self and its mundane domain of interactions (Loaiza 2019). These interdependencies, which extend far beyond the individual organism, play a crucial role in the co-emergence of selves and allow for moral consideration as not only concerning individual entities or ecosystems, but encompassing broader and more complex interdependencies within ecological systems.

Taking the classic example above, we can now re-examine it through an enactivist lens to offer a more nuanced resolution. Let us assume that an invasive species threatens the balance of an ecosystem. Traditionally, a holistic approach might advocate culling the invasive species to protect the ecosystem. Conversely, an individualist view, particularly from an animal rights position, would probably oppose culling, emphasising the intrinsic value and rights of each animal.

However, if we emphasise the interconnectedness and dynamic interactions between organisms and their environment, we can suggest a different approach. If we consider not only the immediate ecological impact, but also the long-term relational dynamics between the invasive species and the ecosystem, we can explore measures such as habitat modification, the use of natural predators or even controlled relocation, rather than outright culling. This sort of enactivist approach exemplifies how the ethical dilemma can be reframed to consider a broader range of factors, including the potential for the ecosystem and the invasive species to evolve together in a mutually beneficial manner. It also highlights how moral deliberation in environmental ethics can transition from static, binary choices to dynamic, context-sensitive solutions that acknowledge the interconnectedness and co-dependency of living beings and their environments. The point is not specifically to use a single solution or axiology but rather to realise that what may be a right answer today may not be right tomorrow. The set of connections that characterises a given situation must be taken into consideration before acting. If value depends on relationships, what may be valid for an intervention in the rainforest is not necessarily also valid, for example, in the Italian countryside.

### 2.3 From Midgley to Enactivism: Interwoven Threads of Interconnected Ethics

In light of (a) and (b), enactivism emerges as a fresh and powerful conceptual lens through which to re-evaluate the axiological foundations of animal and environmental ethics. Its central tenet revolves around the intertwining of perception, cognition, and action, thus offering an opportunity to bridge the disconnect between holistic and individualistic views.

The value of enactivism in the context of animal and environmental ethics is confirmed by how these mechanics connect with other attempts to harmonise these perspectives. For instance, the framework offered by Mary Midgley's philosophy, recently revived by McElwain (2018) and employed by Callicott (1988), is closely linked to an organism's engagement with its environment and frequently alludes indirectly to notions such as autonomy, action and participatory sense-making (Midgley 2002).

Midgley opposes reductionist views that attempt to explain complex phenomena in overly simplistic terms. By emphasising the complexity and interconnectedness of life, she paves the way for a more harmonised understanding of animal and environmental ethics. In *Animals and Why They Matter* (1984), she challenges the so-called human exceptionalism and highlights the arbitrary nature of distinctions made between human and non-human animals, advocating for

a relational value system rooted in interdependence, care, and sympathy. This approach resonates deeply with enactivist principles, offering a vital bridge between the two perspectives. The concept of “mixed community” (around which McElwain’s interpretation also revolves) is rooted in acknowledging that human beings are not isolated entities but rather deeply interconnected with other life forms, both ecologically and morally. This interconnectedness allows us to understand ourselves as part of a larger mixed community, composed of human and non-human animals, and requiring a moral response to the needs and interests of other creatures. Considering this definition, it is easy to state how Mary Midgley’s philosophy, in particular with its focus on relational value, can interact with enactivist ethics. Her critique of reductionism and concept of a ‘mixed community’ align with enactivism’s emphasis on the active, embodied engagement of organisms with their environment.

It has to be said that Mary Midgley does not speak of ‘autonomy’, ‘action’ and ‘participatory sense-making’ as they are understood in contemporary enactivist discourse. Despite this we think it is possible to state that the essence and implications of her work substantially intersect with these enactivist concepts. Although she did not focus explicitly on the concept of autonomy, her holistic view of human nature implies a belief in a strong agency, closely linked to the possibility of assigning moral responsibility to individuals and deeply embedded in this broader network of relations, human and non-human. Her focus on the moral implications of interconnectedness aligns closely with the enactivist understanding of agency as not just a property of isolated individuals but as emerging from the relational dynamics within an environment. For Midgley, moral action is not a mere result of abstract reasoning but is deeply ingrained in our emotions, instincts and evolutionary history. She often emphasised the need to understand our actions in a broader context, integrating insights from biology, anthropology, and other disciplines to create a richer understanding of human morality. Finally, Midgley’s critique of individualism and her emphasis on our interconnectedness with the natural world align with the idea that we derive meaning and understanding not in isolation, but through our participatory engagement with the world.

All of these are threads on which attempts to reconcile animal and environmental ethics have already been set, and thus show us how the suggestions of enactivism may be relevant to this discourse. If we wish, the similarity between Midgley and enactivist perspectives can be pushed even further, instantiating on another little-discussed terrain in environmental ethics: the Gaia hypothesis formulated by James Lovelock (Lovelock, Margulis 1974), taken up by Midgley (2001) and discussed by Thompson (2010). If we ‘scale’ the concept of interconnectedness, in fact, we can consider the entire biota, the

entire planet earth as an autopoietic organism. As we saw in the coral reef example, the attribution of value also depends on the set of relationships we decide to consider. This further point of contact may also be relevant if one wants to investigate the ‘harmonising’ role of Midgley and Enactivism. In this context, however, we will limit ourselves to this mention.

#### 2.4 Towards a Holistic Ethical Framework: Intersecting Enactivism, Pragmatism, and Midgley’s Philosophy

More generally, a parallelism could be attempted between the recognition of the inter-relational domain by enactivism and the approach of Care Ethics (Urban 2014), which emphasise the dependent, situated, and relational nature of agents (Keller 1997).

This approach can be attempted from the shared emphasis on relationality and context of these two disciplines. In essence, for those perspectives, the moral essence of a situation flows from its constitutive relationships, emphasising individual responsibility and context-dependent deliberation. This has the consequence of highlighting the interdependence of agents and thus supporting a redefinition of autonomy, individuality, and agency. A comparable operation is carried out by Petr Urban in “Toward an Expansion of an Enactive Ethics with the Help of Care Ethics” (2014).

Many attempts at reconciliation are in fact moving on the level of a relational system of value attribution (Deplazes-Zemp, Chapman 2020; Norton, Sanbeg 2021) which is nevertheless capable of keeping the agent’s perspective intact. The strength of those approaches lies in their ability to navigate ethical complexities through a deep understanding of context and relationships, offering a more responsive and adaptive ethical framework. Werner and Kielkowitz-Werner’s analysis (2022) is particularly enlightening for anyone moving in this direction. While many traditional ethical frameworks argue for the existence of intrinsic value independent of human interventions (McShane 2007), enactivists suggest its emergence through shared actions. This is in keeping with Midgley’s thesis that ethical considerations are inseparable from human experience. In a world grappling with increasing environmental challenges, this insight has profound implications for conservation policies and strategies. Recognising that ethical judgements arise from our deeply embodied and situated interactions, enactivism emphasises the need for conservation strategies that address both ecological and human well-being harmoniously. Mediation is, to some extent, implicitly recognised in the perspective, underscoring that moral actions and decisions are deeply embedded in the specifics of relational contexts. This negotiation component allows us to make another important comparison

with another attempt to harmonise animal and environmental ethics: pragmatist perspectives.

Both enactivism and pragmatism resist dualities like mind-body or reality-perception. For enactivists, cognition is a dynamic embodiment of action and interaction with the environment (Chemero 2013; Corris 2020). Pragmatists, likewise, argue that cognition is not mere representation, but arises from active engagement with the world (Gallagher 2014; Crippen, Schulkin 2020). With its established focus on the agent's active engagement with the world, these two perspectives can be said to argue that our understanding of the world is neither purely objective nor subjective, but transactional.

It is precisely this transactional perspective that can have ethical significance. As Urban (2014) and Fuchs (2010) propose, albeit in different contexts, the ethical quality of situations derives from the meanings that emerge from the interrelationships between participants. This is almost like saying that, in environmental ethics, moral considerability arises from the dynamic interaction of organisms within their ecosystems.

It is not simply a question of how we understand the world, but how we act on that understanding. An ethical agent is not an isolated thinker, but an actor embedded in a network of relationships. This is the core of Midgley's reconciliation (Midgley 2021), that of many pragmatists (Racine et al. 2021), and also ours.

Regarding point (b) alone, it is appropriate to mention two additional bibliographical references that are relevant for our argument. Louise Barrett's "A Better Kind of Continuity" (2015) provides another lens through which enactivism can be applied to animal ethics. Although her approach may seem 'traditional' at first glance, it provides a crucial critique of Cartesian or computational models of cognition. By emphasising the embodied nature of all minds, Barrett introduces a broader perspective consistent with evolutionary and ethological insights. This implies that understanding animal minds through an enactivist lens could pave the way for broader criteria of moral considerability, linking the findings of Darwinism and ethology. In Barrett's perspective, enactivism presents, as we have seen, a framework for accounting for the autonomy of organisms within their ecological niches. It emphasises the importance of sensorimotor couplings, embodied interactions and the reciprocal shaping of an organism and its environment, facilitating a deeper understanding of cognition that does greater justice to the different ways in which animals perceive and engage with their world.

The shift from the purely cognitive to the moral sphere is not automatic, although we are certainly not the first to discuss the ethical implications of enactivism (Van Grunsven 2021; Urban 2014; Colombetti, Torrance 2009). Generalising, many of these approaches point in the direction of a "de-emphasis of the notions of individual autonomy and

responsibility” (Urban 2014) and urge us to consider inter-affective dimensions in ethical theory (Colombetti, Torrance 2009), which are particularly relevant (we add) to our discourse on environmental and animal ethics. For example, De Pinedo (2020) emphasises the normative dimension that emerges when we recognise organisms as agents or subjects of experience. By starting from the idea of life as self-creation and employing a normative vocabulary to describe it, De Pinedo asserts that adopting a normative perspective on certain phenomena can help avoid taking sides in the ontological debate between eliminativists, reductionists and emergentists. This, in his opinion, highlights the tension between understanding biology in purely factulist and realist terms and the need to recognise the dignity and ethical aspects of life. De Pinedo, referencing early analytic philosophy, contributes to post-cognitivist debates and emphasizes the anti-representationalism of the new paradigm. He counters a descriptivist view that makes ethical and normative judgements dependent on the discovery of independent biological and mental facts, warning against confusing normative issues with ontological ones (De Pinedo 2020).

Synthesising those insights from enactivism, pragmatism and Mary Midgley’s philosophy, we can imagine a new framework. Here, ethical understanding emerges not merely from abstract principles but from the lived and enacted experiences of beings within their environments.

This framework assumes a continuity between cognition, action and environment, emphasising the importance of each component. It offers a more comprehensive lens through which to view moral considerability, one that incorporates the intricate web of relations that define existence. The agent’s relationship with the world is not only cognitive, but also moral. In line with Midgley’s perspective (2002), we can argue that ethics emerges not only from abstract principles, but from the lived and enacted experiences of beings in the world. By integrating the contributions of enactivism and pragmatism, we can better understand the complexity of these experiences and thus chart a more holistic and inclusive ethical course. This approach is particularly applicable in environmental ethics, where it, in theory, can guide a more nuanced moral decision-making.

### 3 **Supporting Arguments: A Relational Approach To Value for Navigating a Complex Scenario**

Let us summarise. The introduction of enactivism, with its emphasis on dynamic interactions between organisms and their environments, facilitates a nuanced understanding of value. If values are not static but evolve in relation to the ongoing enactions within ecosystems, they be seen as relational, emerging from the dynamic interplay of living beings and their environments, adapting and changing in response to evolving ecological contexts (a). Secondly, this implies that even simple organisms [and not necessarily organisms in the traditional sense, see the example of Gaia and the coral reef] can possess a form of agency (b). This has profound implications for animal ethics, potentially leading to greater moral consideration for a wider array of organisms, based on their active engagement with the environment. An embodied and dynamic understanding of value has direct implications on the practical side: recognising that ethical judgements are rooted in deeply embodied interactions can inspire policies that harmoniously address ecological, human, and non-human agency (Hayward 2013).

The aim is to overcome rigid dichotomies that often lead to philosophical and practical gridlock (Sans Pinillos 2022). By framing the debate as a dynamic interaction, enactivism offers a way to find common ground between the values of holism and individualism, leading to more nuanced ethical conclusions. Ethical dilemmas often arise in complex and ever-changing contexts. By reflecting on enactivist perspectives such as Fuchs', it is possible to emphasise how values can be understood as forms of perception, which reveal the qualities of an environment that are relevant to living organisms (Fuchs 2010). This emphasises the dynamic basis of moral considerability that environmental ethics, in our view, requires. Our approach to environmental ethics recognises that organisms co-produce their world and give meaning to environmental components through sensorimotor activities, shaping the ethical landscape.

Incorporating enactivism into our framework addresses both holistic and individualistic ends of the philosophical spectrum. On the one hand, it urges a move away from an overly atomistic understanding of individual entities, emphasising their embeddedness and relational engagements with the environment. On the other, it challenges the overly abstract or detached view of holistic systems by emphasising the active and embodied agency of the individual entities that constitute such systems.

This dual intervention helps promote a richer understanding of ethical scenarios, especially those concerning environmental and animal ethics. Fostering a shift towards dynamism, interconnectiveness, and engaged ethical considerations over static, isolated and

abstract views. This can help clarify the inherent complexity of the moral situations addressed in environmental and animal ethics. The goal is to provide fertile ground for the development of more responsive, inclusive, and holistic ethical policies and practices.

#### **4 Counterarguments: Ethical Complexity and Assumptions**

This proposal clearly has limitations. The first is that it does not directly address the issue of the irreconcilability of holistic and individualist values (Faria, Paez 2019). Our discourse assumes that they are reconcilable, and so we do not present specific arguments in support of this assumption. Reconciliation is certainly desirable for the reasons we have outlined. Moreover, the idea of at least a rapprochement between perspectives is well established in the literature (Reed 2022; Rolston 2022) and we refer to these publications in to provide context for the present work.

The possible objections that interest us are different.

The first concern stems from the fact that enactivism is a cognitive theory and, possibly, a philosophy of mind. Unless we commit naturalistic fallacies, its application in the field of animal and environmental ethics is not obvious.

We answer this objection with an internal division corresponding the breakdown (a) and (b) we previously established. (b) In support of the relevance of enactivism for this discourse, it is possible to say that if scientific findings from ethology are relevant for questions of animal ethics (Würbel 2009), and empirical data from ecology and systems theory are admissible for questions of environmental ethics (Dicks 2017), why should enactivist considerations about the nature of human and animal agents not be admissible?

Furthermore, on the metaethical side (a), if it is accepted in the literature that the enactivist framework allows for rethinking the moral question by redefining the relationship of the human agent and the process of value attribution (Werner, Kielkowicz-Werner 2022), why should this not apply to the field of animal and environmental ethics?

Staying with meta-ethical questions, it may be necessary to say a few words about our relational approach and its implications. A fluid approach to value could be understood as moral relativism, in which every act can be justified according to the dynamism of the context. Instead of adhering to fixed or absolute values, a dynamic approach recognises that values may evolve, adapt, or change according to different circumstances, cultural contexts or individual experiences. It implies an awareness of the fact that values can be multi-layered, interconnected and sometimes conflicting. This resonates to some extent with relativism in that it denies the existence of fixed, universal

moral truths that apply uniformly in all situations and cultural contexts. Recognising this fact, however, does not mean advancing the promotion of a form of uncertainty or ambiguity, which could potentially lead to ethical paralysis or lack of moral responsibility.

Furthermore, perceiving reality as transactional raises concerns about subjectivity and the elusiveness of shared truths. This viewpoint suggests reality could devolve into a bundle of subjective experiences, negotiations and understandings, which would risk leading to an erosion of shared realities, with the risk of hindering community or collective action.

How can one protect oneself from the same objections that are made, for instance, to pragmatist theories of value?

The answer lies in a sort of Kantian-Constructivist sense, asserting that adaptive values remain grounded in reality, despite their subjective mediation by human cognition. This aligns with the idea of a 'transactional' reality, in that our understanding of reality is mediated by our interactions and experiences. From this perspective, although moral principles are not 'out there' in the noumenal world, they are nonetheless objective in the sense that they are the result of rational deliberation and can be universally endorsed by all rational beings who share a specific 'vantage point' on reality.

There is an underlying structure to our experiences: biological, ecological, in terms of cognitive understanding and moral reasoning. While moral principles are not fixed or absolute, they are nonetheless deeply rooted in the biological and ecological contexts of our existence. In a world where reality is shaped by interactions, our transactions with the environment, with other beings and with each other would be judged by principles that can be rationally approved and justified. The relational bases from which they arise are not arbitrary but rather binding and this makes it possible not to deny objectivity in moral reasoning: ethical principles are grounded in the lived experiences and relational dynamics of individuals within their specific environments.

Similarly, the empirical data that define the status of us, animals and ecosystems cannot be disregarded within moral deliberation and, consequently, must be defended in a public context, in confrontation with other moral agents, with other politicians, with other activists. Relativism can be avoided using a public rationality and the maintenance of a strong naturalistic constraint (which, however, does not amount to a violation of Moore's Naturalistic Fallacy). Enactivism emphasizes the active role of the agent in navigating these complex moral landscapes, suggesting that ethical understanding is constantly evolving in response to changing circumstances.

It is precisely on this system that another possible objection is worth raising. Emphasising interconnectedness could lead to the paralysis of ethical decision-making. Recognizing every action's

far-reaching effects on a complex network might render decision-making difficult, as assessing every consequence becomes overwhelming. Understanding that our actions reverberate through this tangled web means that we must consider how even seemingly minor choices can have significant consequences elsewhere. This depth of impact can be daunting: individuals risk finding themselves in a state of 'analysis paralysis', where they think about a situation so much that every action is prevented because of the cognitive toll it takes.

Again, the answer is twofold. First any theory, when taken to extremes, risks becoming self-defeating. This is true even for utilitarianism, where the intricacies of predicting outcomes and weighing pleasures and pains can lead to undecidability. To avoid a regress to infinity, it is enough to stick to the practical dimension of deliberation. What is relevant or not for a decision in each situation emerges from the situation itself. One can potentially scrutinise every single motivation and every meta-motivation behind it, but it is also sensible to scrutinise when it is appropriate to stop in order not to arrive at an unfortunate state of immobility. Not all factors are always relevant and what might be critical in one scenario may be insignificant in another. Certain situations have an intrinsic quality that brings some aspects to the forefront at the expense of others. Recognising this situational relevance requires a certain responsiveness and flexibility in decision-making. There is a need to balance the emergence of the situation with general principles: although it is essential to analyse the vast network of potential consequences, decisions still need to be made. A middle way is therefore desired, in which decision-makers can recognise the determinants and scope of their choices without being paralysed by them. In complex situations, heuristic and rational methods may be useful, which, even if they fail to account for all nuances, can provide a structured path for decision-making.

## 5 Conclusions

This article highlights the dual contribution that enactivism can bring to the field of animal and environmental ethics. It is only a foray into the potential addition of enactivism to attempts to bridge the gap between holism and individualism. Although this proposal of enactivism is not without its critics, its strengths lie in its call for fluidity over rigidity and relationship over isolation. In the contemporary era, in which dichotomies often hinder progress and understanding, this reconceptualization could be, in our opinion, the bearer of important developments in the field of animal and environmental ethics. The essence of this discourse is not simply to propose a harmonised approach, but to question the very boundaries that have traditionally defined these fields.

The reconciliation between holistic and individualist values, although not directly addressed, emerges as an essential background to our discussions.

Central to our argument remains the application of enactivist suggestions to environmental and animal ethics, both as systems of data that can inform and influence the attribution of moral considerability and as constituent parts of the framework within which such attribution would take place. This last point represents a contact between enactivist positions that dealt with values as arising from the interactions and relations between a subject and the world (Fuchs 2010) and the 'relational' branches of ethics in environmental and animal contexts.

Inevitably these can only be suggestions and indications for possible future research, focused both on the formal aspect of this contribution and on its more concretely practical side. Here we content ourselves with indicating a path, hoping not to be the only ones to follow it.

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