

## Article

# The Great Web of Being: Environmental Ethics without Value Hierarchy

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**Abstract:** Hierarchical views of the world such as the great chain of being have come under sustained critique in recent decades, and rightly so. They have justified not only the domination of non-human creatures but also the devaluation (via animalization/racialization) of many humans. The rejection of hierarchy and the great chain of being, however, does not require the rejection of the Christian Platonic theological vision upon which hierarchy is often based. In this paper, I argue that Christian Platonic theology has always been in tension with the great chain of being and is better suited to a non-hierarchical view of creaturely value. I then develop the ethical implications of this view in dialogue with both environmental and animal ethics and anti-racist and decolonial scholarship.

**Keywords:** great chain of being; Christian Platonic theology; environmental ethics; animal ethics; decolonial theory; value; hierarchy; animalization; racialization

## 1. Introduction

In her beautiful essay, “What Slime Knows”, Lacy M. Johnson invites readers to consider the remarkable lives of slime molds, creatures that have likely existed for hundreds of millions of years longer than plants, surviving mass extinction after mass extinction with little to no change. The fact that slime molds emerged so early in evolutionary history may give the impression that they are highly simplistic creatures. Johnson quickly dispels this idea in a remarkable paragraph on the capacities of a slime mold:

“When it encounters something it likes, such as oatmeal, the cytoplasm pulsates more quickly. If it finds something it dislikes, like salt, quinine, bright light, cold, or caffeine, it pulsates more slowly and moves its cytoplasm away (though it can choose to overcome these preferences if it means survival). In one remarkable study published in *Science*, Japanese researchers created a model of the Tokyo metropolitan area using oat flakes to represent population centers, and found that *Physarum polycephalum* configured itself into a near replica of the famously intuitive Tokyo rail system. In another experiment, scientists blasted a specimen with cold air at regular intervals, and found that it learned to expect the blast, and would retract in anticipation. It can solve mazes in pursuit of a single oat flake, and later, can recall the path it took to reach it. More remarkable still, a slime mold can grow indefinitely in its plasmodial stage. As long as it has an adequate food supply and is comfortable in its environment, it doesn’t age and it doesn’t die”. (Johnson 2021)

Western philosophy and theology have long imagined the world as hierarchical in nature. The paradigmatic form of this hierarchy is the medieval Christian notion of the *scala naturae*, often called the great chain of being (GCB). The hierarchy of the GCB is both ontological and axiological. The beings higher on the chain participate to a greater degree in the divine and are more divinelike. As such, their being and value exceed those of lesser beings.<sup>1</sup>

Even when the picture of the world behind the GCB was upended by the theory of evolution, something very much like the GCB’s hierarchy remained firmly in place. The image



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of a chain was replaced by the image of a tree with life branching and moving upwards.<sup>2</sup> The ordering of living things remained roughly the same, from “simple” creatures like fungi and plants all the way up to human beings (though it lacked the non-living creatures at the bottom and the spiritual creatures at the top). Slime molds, if they were known, would, Johnson writes, “no doubt be near the very bottom, just above dirt” (Johnson 2021). Citing slime molds and other remarkable non-human creatures, Johnson challenges the vision of a world of hierarchical perfection and value. There is, she argues, “no hierarchy in the web of life”.

Johnson’s argument stems primarily from a commitment to recognizing and appreciating the incredible capacities of non-humans. Another compelling set of arguments against value hierarchy arises from a different source: anti-racist and decolonial scholarship. Several scholars working at the intersection of animal studies, Black studies, and decolonial theory have argued that a value hierarchy like that of the GCB has played a crucial role in racialization and colonization. By identifying non-European peoples with animals and locating them between humans (read: whites) and animals on a *scala naturae*, European colonialists employed the value hierarchy of the GCB to devalue other peoples and justify displacement, genocide, slavery, and other forms of oppression. Rather than countering racist and colonialist ideas by insisting that all human beings are fully human—a move that risks countering human degradation by further degrading non-humans—these scholars argue that we must resist the human–animal value hierarchy on which the colonial world has been built.

Both sets of arguments are compelling. In dialogue with them, this paper offers a further argument against value hierarchy and an alternative to it by appealing to an unexpected source: the very Christian Platonic theology on which the GCB was developed. I argue that value hierarchy is not only ethically and politically problematic, as other scholars have demonstrated; it is also theologically doubtful, even on the terms of its own theology. In the Christian Platonic theology on which the GCB depends, creation is a vast array of different beings that, in their diversity, reflect the infinite goodness of the divine. A better version of this theological vision includes no axiological hierarchy. Moreover, I argue that a reconstituted Christian Platonic theology of creaturely value has a great deal to contribute to constructive ethical deliberation about how to move past value hierarchy with its anthropocentric, racist, and colonialist legacy.

The reasons to develop a Christian Platonic critique of value hierarchy go beyond the usefulness of an internal critique of the GCB tradition. As Alexander Hampton has recently argued, Christian Platonism has a great deal to offer to environmental ethics. Its vision of the natural world strongly resists many tendencies of anthropocentrism, including the notion that humans confer meaning and value on an otherwise meaningless and valueless world (Hampton 2021). Moving the Christian Platonic tradition beyond its entanglements with hierarchy would allow its contribution to environmental thought to come more clearly into view.

Despite the excellent reasons to do away with it, the value hierarchy that elevates humans over other beings is not so easy to reject. The reason is simple: rejecting this value hierarchy seems to entail that all entities are morally equal, which strikes many as implausible and practically unworkable. The challenge is a serious one. If the rejection of value hierarchy were to entail equality of ethical treatment for all creaturely entities, then it would be implausible. I argue, however, that while the rejection of hierarchy does challenge anthropocentric ethics, it does not lead to unacceptable ethical results. A Christian Platonic theology of creaturely value can respond to this objection without reinscribing hierarchy. It can, therefore, be of service to the difficult task of moving beyond a species value hierarchy. With “the great chain of being come undone”, writes Joshua Bennett, “a radically new set of relations is possible” (Bennett 2020, p. 4). Christian Platonic theology can contribute to the work of imagining this radically new set of relations.

I begin in the next section with a short account of the GCB and value hierarchy and some key critiques raised against them in both environmental and animal ethics and

decolonial and anti-racist scholarship. In the third section, I argue that Christian Platonic theology can offer a complementary critique of value hierarchy that can open up to a constructive alternative. I offer a sketch of the theological alternative. The fourth section considers its ethical implications, developing them in dialogue with environmental ethics, animal ethics, and decolonial thought.

## 2. The Great Chain of Being and Its Contemporary Critics

The classic study of the GCB was written by Arthur Lovejoy in a book of the same title. Originally published in 1936, Lovejoy's book is now almost ninety years old. Despite its age, the book remains remarkably influential, and it offers a helpful way into the question of the GCB.<sup>3</sup> The GCB, Lovejoy begins, is a perfect illustration of Alfred North Whitehead's famous line that Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. There can, according to Lovejoy, be "little doubt" that the Idea of the Good—that which all things desire—was Plato's God and no doubt that it became Aristotle's (Lovejoy 1964, p. 42). And the Platonic "God" was also the "necessitating logical ground of the existence of this world" (p. 44). The Good, in other words, is not only the final end of all desire but also the source of the existence and reality of all things (p. 45).

It is no surprise, then, that when Plato offers a mythical account of the creation of the world in the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge that creates the world is said to create solely because he is "good". Plato, Lovejoy writes, "takes advantage of the double signification the word [good] had in Greek as in modern usage" (p. 49). Not only is the Platonic God good as in desirable but also good as in beneficent. He wanted nothing but for the world to be as much like himself as possible. As such, he created the world as a replica of the world of forms with a material counterpart to every intelligible idea.

Lovejoy calls the idea that God's goodness necessitates the exhaustive realization of every possible kind of creature "the principle of plenitude", and it is a crucial element of the GCB. In Plato's picture, every possible creature exists, but creatures are not ordered into a single *scala naturae* or hierarchy of being or value. Lovejoy finds the genesis of the hierarchical aspect of the GCB in Aristotle's picture of the world as consisting of various continua, some of which are hierarchical. While Aristotle never placed all creatures into a single hierarchical chain of being, he laid the intellectual groundwork for others to do so (pp. 55–59). Lovejoy writes: "Though the ingredients of this complex of ideas came from Plato and Aristotle, it is in Neoplatonism that they first appear as fully organized into a coherent general scheme of things" (p. 61). The principle of plenitude is fused with an ontological hierarchy in Neoplatonic emanation—most importantly in the work of Plotinus—and it enters medieval Christian theology in this form. And its influence stretches far beyond medieval thought.

The key observation I want to highlight from the highly abbreviated origin story I just recounted is that the GCB is motivated by the idea that God shares the divine goodness maximally with creation. The central motivation does not require that the resulting creation be hierarchically ordered. One only ends up with hierarchy if one has other grounds for assuming that hierarchy results from God sharing goodness maximally. Hierarchy, then, may not be strictly necessary within Christian Platonism.<sup>4</sup> One might think that the very existence of a perfect being is an indication that greater and lesser perfection is possible and therefore necessary. If God is at the top, then it stands to reason that there is a bottom and a range between. But that picture mistakenly imagines divine perfection as the pinnacle of a creaturely hierarchy. The God of the Christian Platonic tradition is not properly conceived as one end of a spectrum but as something that transcends any creaturely spectrum, not the best being but the ground and source of all being. Nothing about how God is conceived requires creation to be ordered into an ontological or axiological hierarchy.

Lovejoy's account of the GCB and its history can be and has been contested in many of the particulars (Wilson 1987; Bynum 1975). I turn to Lovejoy only to introduce some of the key sources of the hierarchy of being that undoubtedly marks much of the Christian Platonic tradition. Lovejoy's history, moreover, gives us some reason to think that the

hierarchical nature of creation in Christian Platonism is not a strictly necessary part of the tradition. The argument of this paper, though, does not turn on the accuracy of Lovejoy's history. I will argue constructively against the necessity of hierarchy on broadly Christian Platonic grounds.

If hierarchy is an inessential element in Christian Platonic theology, the hierarchy of the GCB nonetheless proved to be persistently influential, even outlasting its theological basis. Nothing did more to overthrow the vision of the world as consisting of a whole spectrum of fixed kinds than the discovery of the evolution of life on Earth, which included the recognition that many species have gone extinct. Yet, while scientists could no longer accept Lovejoy's principle of plenitude in light of the theory of evolution, many held fast to something very much like the hierarchy of the GCB. Images of the evolutionary tree of life looked surprisingly like the pre-evolutionary *scala naturae* with "simple" creatures like fungi and plants at the bottom and more complex animals higher up—and humans, of course, at the peak.<sup>5</sup>

This natural hierarchy has been a target of critique by contemporary environmental and animal ethicists. The focus has been especially on value hierarchy, which can be and often is maintained without the ontological hierarchy associated with Platonism. Johnson's critique, described briefly in the introduction, is a good example of how such critiques of value hierarchy tend to go. They begin with the flood of new scientific findings about the incredible complexity and intelligence of other creatures. Almost every human capacity once thought to make us unique is now found among multiple different species. The study of social mammals has found increasingly complex forms of communication, culture, and social structure as well as emotions and behaviors that are not implausibly described as moral.<sup>6</sup> Similar results are emerging in the study of birds.<sup>7</sup> The idea that humans possess uniquely value-granting traits that secure their location at the top of an axiological hierarchy begins to look implausible.

Appealing to the exceptional capacities of social mammals and other creatures already assumed to be near the "top" of the hierarchy is one common way to challenge the GCB. Appealing to slime molds and other "lower" creatures is another. Slime molds are just one example. Recent scholarship about the capacities of trees to communicate, coordinate behavior, and provide mutual aid is stunning.<sup>8</sup> We are discovering more seemingly every day about the incredible capacities of plants, fungi, and other creatures previously (and wrongly) considered completely devoid of intelligence.<sup>9</sup>

These findings make clear the fact that the traits often believed to grant humans particular value are not as unique as many have long assumed. We are not the only creatures with intelligence, language, and culture. But even this point does not quite go far enough. Capacities such as intelligence, language, and culture are all capacities that have been falsely held up as unique to humans. While it is important to challenge human uniqueness on these grounds, it is also important to question why these capacities are chosen as particularly significant or value-granting in the first place.

We find a version of this challenge in Martha Nussbaum's recent book, *Justice for Animals*. Nussbaum criticizes the criterion by which species are ranked. The GCB, she argues, is not drawn by simply looking at nature. It is a product of human arrogance. If, Nussbaum argues, we play the ranking game without simply assuming our superiority, the results will not be as flattering as we want to believe:

"We humans win the prize on the IQ and language parameters. And guess who invented those tests! But many animals are much stronger and swifter. Birds do vastly better on spatial perception and the ability to remember distant destinations. Most animals have a keener sense of smell. Our hearing is very limited: some animals (e.g., dogs) hear higher frequencies than we can and many (elephants, whales) hear lower frequencies. We sing opera, birds sing amazing birdsong, whales sing whale songs. Is one "better"? To a lover of music that's like asking whether we should prefer Mozart or Wagner: they are so different

that it is a silly waste of time to compare them on a single scale” (Nussbaum 2023, p. 31).

She continues further, highlighting the many areas in which other creatures exceed our own capacities.<sup>10</sup> Life-forms, she concludes, “don’t line up to be graded on a single scale: they are just wonderfully different” (Nussbaum 2023, p. 31).<sup>11</sup>

Nussbaum is certainly right in her judgments about the many domains in which other creatures exceed human capacities. She is also right to challenge the standard criteria by which species are ranked. But are all possible rankings really arbitrary? We exceed *E. coli* bacteria in some measures: for example, intelligence, self-awareness, and the capacities for love and justice. *E. coli* bacteria exceed us in, among other things, the capacities to reproduce quickly, transfer genes horizontally, and spread without detection. Is it really nothing but arrogance that makes us see the former as more valuable than the latter? Are all hierarchical judgments about value mere prejudice?

At this point, the critic is faced with several options. Johnson takes one option by asserting that “value superiority is not an inherent reality of the natural world”. For Johnson, all judgments that one trait is more valuable than another are prejudice because the world contains no such values. The difficulty with this route is that it appears to make all moral judgments arbitrary, and it is difficult to see where environmental ethics goes from here.<sup>12</sup>

Nussbaum takes a different route. Rather than rejecting all criteria for assessing value, she offers an alternative set. Nussbaum believes that there is one capacity that makes an entity intrinsically valuable: sentience.<sup>13</sup> While sentience is sometimes seen as a spectrum, she treats it as a trait that one either has or does not. If one has it, one ought to be treated according to justice; if one does not have it, then justice does not apply. Rather than a ladder or chain of value, then, Nussbaum gives us a two-tiered system. Her view does not eliminate value hierarchy but does dramatically simplify it. In structure, her view is less like the GCB and more like anthropocentric views such as Kant’s in which human beings are ends-in-themselves and all other things are means. Nussbaum maintains something similar to the Kantian structure and expands what counts as an end-in-itself: not humans alone but all sentient living things.

Nussbaum is certainly not alone in defending a two-tiered system. Related views have long been held by animal welfare and animal rights theorists, including, with some important differences, seminal figures such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan (Singer 2009; Regan 2004). These views are neat in that they remove the difficulties of complex hierarchies of value. It is hard to avoid the impression, though, that they are too neat. However numerous its flaws, the GCB at least recognizes the value of all things, sentient or not, living or not. Nothing is reduced to mere instrumentality.<sup>14</sup> And the refusal to treat aspects of the world as of merely instrumental value is a virtue, especially as we see the increasingly catastrophic results of human beings’ (or, better, some human beings’) instrumentalization of the world. Flattening the upper realms of the GCB and lopping off the lower realms may make ethics easier, but it does not offer the ethical vision we need.

Despite these issues, Johnson and Nussbaum represent one important line of critique of the GCB and value hierarchy. Another powerful line of critique arises from recent scholarship that draws together animal studies, Black studies, and decolonial theory to demonstrate that human hierarchy often implicitly depends, at least for its ideological justification, on the value hierarchy of humans over other creatures. Sylvia Wynter has compellingly developed this claim, arguing that the superiority of “Man”—a conception of the human defined as the white Christian male—depends conceptually on a vision of creaturely value with Man at the top and other human beings along a spectrum that places them closer to non-human animals (Wynter 2003; cf. Nussbaum 2023, pp. 31–32).

In her treatment of the relationship between race and species, Claire Jean Kim displays the many implicit and explicit appeals to a human–animal value hierarchy in the construction of modern notions of race (Kim 2016, pp. 24–60). Tracing the relationship between race and species in America from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, she

demonstrates that white Americans racialized non-European peoples not only by ranking them on a spectrum from human to animal but also by animalizing them in different ways. Black slaves were most often compared to apes or domestic animals. Native peoples were described as part of nature (and thus not of history or civilization) and compared to wild game animals. Chinese immigrants, meanwhile, were compared to pests such as rodents and insects. While the hierarchical rankings among races could be fluid, the end points of the hierarchy—whites on top as fully human and non-human animals below—were fixed. An underlying value hierarchy like that of the GCB, in other words, was crucial to the conceptual process of racialization with its implicit and explicit devaluations.

One common response to being devalued by being animalized is to insist that one is human and ought to be treated as such. This claim is, of course, true. Yet Kim rejects this strategy, which, she argues, cannot succeed because it continues to reinscribe the very species hierarchy on which racialization and devaluation depend. She argues that racial categories and their hierarchical power differentials “cannot be unsutured” from species and its value hierarchy. The taxonomies of race and species, she writes, are “intimately bound with one another [and] must be disassembled together” (Kim 2016, pp. 286–87).

This powerful line of thought opens up new possibilities for bringing together anti-racist work and animal advocacy. We find this combination in the Black Veganism of Aph and Syl Ko, who see their refusal to support animal oppression as part of their anti-racism. Syl Ko writes that as long as the current hierarchical notion of “the human” and “the animal” are intact, “white supremacy remains intact” (Ko and Ko 2017, p. 47). Elsewhere, Aph Ko argues that recognizing the relationship between species and race enables an analysis of oppression that goes beyond intersectional analysis, confronting the deep, underlying conceptual and social structures behind the racist oppression of humans and the human domination of non-humans (Ko 2019).<sup>15</sup>

These ethical critiques of the GCB’s value hierarchy, like those of Nussbaum and Johnson, are compelling. Moreover, they help us see that more is at stake in rejecting value hierarchy than the ethical status of non-human creatures. The shape of colonial modernity depends in crucial respects on an implicit or explicit value hierarchy that places (some) human beings at the pinnacle of the tree of life.

Moreover, by illuminating the essential interconnection between interhuman relations and human relations with other creatures, these critiques of value hierarchy open up new possibilities. In a study of twentieth-century African American literature, Joshua Bennett focuses on “the ongoing entanglement of blackness and animality in black social, civic and psychic life, movements when black people and nonhuman animals are forced to live in too-close quarters” (Bennett 2020, p. 5). In this fraught proximity, he seeks insight into personhood, agency, and interspecies relationality, concluding that “nothing short of another cosmos” of radically new relations awaits the one willing to explore such spaces (Bennett 2020, p. 4).

Many of Bennett’s insights are about “black sociality”—which is to say, ways of being human—with the fundamental insight that reimagining how we are human is a crucial part of realizing a new world of interspecies relations. What Bennett uncovers is what he describes as “the gift of black culture, the gift of blackness: the great chain of being come undone, life itself unfettered and moving in all directions, a window into the worlds that thrive at the underside of modernity” (Bennett 2020, p. 4).

What does it mean for the GCB to “come undone” in this way? Bennett’s vision of “life itself unfettered and moving in all directions” is certainly not a two-tiered value system, much less a system of simple moral equality. Bennett is offering something messier, something less systematic and more relational. He is also insisting on the inextricable interdependence of how we are human and how we relate to other beings. Bennett’s primary interlocutors are literary, but we can ask how we might develop something like Bennett’s vision in the ethical language of value that animal and environmental ethicists employ. Rather than rearranging or flattening the hierarchy of value, can we break it apart, speaking of value in a way that opens up new worlds of relationality?

I want to pursue this possibility by drawing from an unexpected source: the very Christian Platonic theology on which hierarchical visions of creation often depend. Rather than seeking an alternative to the GCB outside of its own theological presuppositions, I am going to try a different path: criticizing and revising the GCB from within its own Platonic theological vision of the world. Christian Platonic theology, I will argue, not only provides grounds for a robust critique of the axiological hierarchy presupposed by the GCB but also offers an alternative path beyond hierarchy, mere equality, or a two-tiered system of value. This alternative path is generous—excessively so, in comparison to most alternative approaches to environmental ethics—in its attributions of value in the world. For this reason, it decenters the usual question of which beings have how much value and instead focuses our attention on how we are valuing and relating to creatures, which is to say, how we are being human in multispecies worlds.

### 3. Christian Platonic Theology beyond Value Hierarchy

The critiques of value hierarchy just discussed are quite powerful. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that they make at least one unfounded assumption, namely, that ethical conclusions follow directly from value hierarchy. In fact, value hierarchy is consistent with many different conclusions about human ethical relationships with non-human creatures. The idea that we have greater value than other animals does not in itself entail the conclusion that we can dominate them, even if it has been used this way. It could just as easily be—and, in fact, has been—paired with an ethical vision in which our uniquely valuable capacities are given to us to care for lower creatures.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, the critics are right to worry. The work of Wynter, Kim, and others demonstrates the dangers of a human–animal value hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> In addition, research by psychologists suggests that belief in “human superiority over animals” is a key mechanism in explaining “greater acceptance of animal exploitation” (Dhont and Hodson 2014). Those who rate higher on beliefs about human supremacy, moreover, impose a greater value hierarchy across different non-human animals (Krings et al. 2021). While maintaining human value supremacy does not necessarily justify human or non-human exploitation, it does seem prone to do so. Fortunately, value hierarchy is not a necessary feature of Christian Platonism. In fact, as I will now argue, there are good reasons within Christian Platonic theology to reject value hierarchy.

Before developing this argument, I must correct a misimpression of the GCB found in many critiques, including Nussbaum’s and Johnson’s. Nussbaum and Johnson seem to assume that the GCB works by ranking creatures according to their humanlikeness. Creatures that are more intelligent, linguistic, social, and cultural rank higher because we consider these defining characteristics of human beings.

Nussbaum and Johnson certainly have a point. More humanlike creatures are generally placed higher on the GCB than less humanlike creatures. Nonetheless, no Christian Platonist would assert that value consists of humanlikeness. Value consists, rather, of the divinelikeness each creature receives through its participation in God.<sup>18</sup> And every creature has value because every creature receives its being and goodness through participation in God. Importantly, though, every kind of creature is divinelike in its own distinctive way. Indeed, a common explanation of the diversity of creation appeals to the fact that no one creature can reflect the divine in all its transcendent perfections. As Thomas Aquinas famously wrote:

“Hence we must say that the distinction and multitude of things come from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the

divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever” (Aquinas 1920, I.47.1).

Aquinas’s articulation of a Christian Platonic vision of creaturely value allows us to reframe Nussbaum’s and Johnson’s critiques. Placing human beings at the top of the (terrestrial part of the) creaturely value hierarchy may very well reflect human prejudices. We do tend to see the distinctive characteristics of human beings as particularly divineline. And we often find it difficult to recognize divineline traits in other species, something that was probably more difficult before the many recent findings about the capacities of other creatures. The reason is not, as Johnson implies, that all judgments of value are *mere* projections of human prejudice. It is rather that we are, for obvious reasons, more attuned to our own value and the value of creatures like us. Our value, rooted in the ways we participate in and reflect the divine, is real. It is not, however, the only or best way to be divineline. As Aquinas says, God creates diverse creatures so that what is wanting in the way one represents God will be supplied by others.

The picture of creaturely value that results from this vision of creation can be construed as a hierarchical chain, but it need not be. The idea is that God’s perfect simplicity, when translated into the finite world of creation, can only be represented by a high degree of creaturely diversity. It is true that “likeness” is the sort of thing that we often arrange into greater or less. Yet, likeness in this case differs from likeness in such cases because we are not considering likeness on a single scale or according to a single trait. We are considering the seemingly endless ways in which a finite creature could be like the infinite divine.<sup>19</sup> Human beings are indeed divineline in ways that no other creatures are. The same is true of slime molds, cuddlefish, hydrangeas, and honeybees—and even rivers, clouds, and comets.

Johnson, for example, points out that “a slime mold can grow indefinitely in its plasmodial stage. As long as it has an adequate food supply and is comfortable in its environment, it doesn’t age and it doesn’t die”. A slime mold is, in other words, capable of living forever, at least in principle. In this respect, is it not more divineline than a human being? Or one can think of divine simplicity itself. While no creature can be perfectly simple, slime molds seem closer to the ideal than we do. As Johnson writes, a slime mold “is a single cell that can grow as large as a bath mat, has no brain, no sense of sight or smell, but can solve mazes, learn patterns, keep time, and pass down the wisdom of generations” (Johnson 2021).

All I am doing in the previous paragraph is assessing humans and slime molds according to traits commonly attributed to God. But, of course, God cannot be adequately described by human language. Human trait language applies to God analogically when it applies at all. I do not think the approach to creaturely value we find in Christian Platonic theology is best understood as one in which each creature is assessed according to a list of pre-determined divine traits. Instead, we ought to get to know each creature in its uniqueness, its distinctive beauty and goodness. In doing so, we learn to better understand the divine. The ways creatures can reflect the divine are far too numerous for us to fully understand or articulate.

There are, we could say, different “lanes”—plausibly infinitely many—in which one can be more or less like the divine. We have no obvious reason to claim that one lane is more important than another—that, for example, being more self-aware is more important to divineline than being simpler or living longer. Given the fact that the divine infinitely exceeds us, our understanding of divineline is sure to be partial at best, and it is almost certain to be skewed toward the particular characteristics of God that humans most reflect. Whether or not the different lanes are ultimately commensurable, we are surely unable to judge which is more important. The result, then, is that every creature is of value but that their degrees of value are—at least as far as we can judge and perhaps even in God’s judgment—incommensurable.

While Christian Platonic theology has long been paired with a hierarchical view of creation, the argument I have been developing suggests that the combination has always been questionable. Christian Platonic theology fits at least as naturally with a view accord-



ing to which creation consists of creatures who reflect the divine in a wide variety of ways and therefore instantiate value in myriad incommensurable ways. Sharing divinelikeness with creation requires a high degree of diversity in which each creature reflects the divine in its own characteristic way, every instance of which is valuable in a unique manner. The fact that creatures move through forms over the course of evolutionary history could be conceived as one more way in which creaturely diversity is continually realized (Davidson 2018). In such a world, no singular axiological ranking system is possible.

The most important work defending a Christian Platonic hierarchy of value in recent decades is Adrian Pabst's *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Pabst 2012). Pabst's book takes the form of an impressive and deeply learned genealogy of Western philosophical and theological conceptions of individuation from ancient Greece to the present. The story centers on the achievement and then loss of a Christian Platonic account of individuation as constituted relationally by participation in God. Pabst's genealogy is clearly meant to convince the reader of his preferred view, though, as Paul Griffiths notes, he does not develop a metaphysical argument for it beyond the genealogy itself (Griffiths 2012, p. 251).

There is no doubt that the Christian Platonic figures Pabst elevates—most notably, Augustine, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Aquinas—believed in a hierarchy of ordered creaturely relations. Why, though, must these relations be hierarchical? Pabst says surprisingly little about this. The only straightforward argument mentioned in both Augustine and Aquinas has to do with a connection both make between number and creaturely order (Pabst 2012, pp. 88–92, 270–71).<sup>20</sup> Because numbers are ordered hierarchically, so too are creatures. But whatever the merits of such an argument historically, it is certainly not compelling today. At this point, the lack of a constructive argument leaves the case for hierarchy lacking at best. And if Christian Platonic theology can affirm Pabst's preferred view of individuation without a value hierarchy, as I think it can, then we have good reason to prefer the non-hierarchical version.<sup>21</sup>

The theological critique of the GCB just enumerated lays the groundwork for an alternative picture of creaturely value that draws from the same theological vision but reaches quite different conclusions. Without a singular chain reaching to the divine, there is simply no pressure left in this Christian Platonic theological vision to rank the vast diversity of created beings, living and non-living. Humans are plausibly the animal species most capable of abstract and instrumental thought. Other species exceed us in endlessly varied ways, some of which we partially understand and most of which we do not. Comparisons of absolute value across the various forms of divinelikeness are impossible, at least for us. Rather than insisting on our superior value, we ought to recognize the value of each thing for what it is. This allows for an approach to creaturely value that, better than Nussbaum's own, reflects her claim that creatures "are just wonderfully different". The GCB gives way to something more like a great web of being with the whole mirroring the divine but no single node with axiological superiority over any other.

Building on and revising the Christian Platonic theology of creaturely value, I have thus far focused on the value of individual creatures. A focus only on the value of individual creatures, however, has quite reasonably been criticized as inadequate for an environmental ethic. As Baird Callicott writes, "an adequate value theory for nonanthropocentric environmental ethics must provide for the intrinsic value of both individual organisms and a hierarchy of superorganismic entities—populations, species, biocenoses, biomes, and the biosphere" (Callicott 1984, p. 304). Nussbaum leaves no room for the value of non-individuals. What can a Christian Platonic theology of creaturely value say about the value of "superorganismic entities", which I will refer to as ecological wholes?<sup>22</sup>

If we accept Aquinas' assertion quoted above that a creation that includes an array of creatures that reflect the divine in different ways is an overall better reflection of the divine—and thus a better creation—than one with a limited number of types of creatures, then the grounds for valuing biodiversity are clear. And by valuing biodiversity, this view can value the continued existence of ecological wholes such as species and the ecosystems on which they depend.

Still, we might ask whether this view can “provide for the intrinsic value” of species or ecosystems, as Callicott insists. It can. In fact, its ability to make sense of the intrinsic value—or, better, what Alexander Hampton helpfully designates “intrinsic value through participation” (Hampton 2021, p. 394)—of ecological wholes is one of its great strengths. While Callicott insists that environmental ethics must account for the value of ecological wholes, several prominent environmental ethicists are skeptical that such an account is possible (Jamieson 2008; Sandler 2012). The reason is simple. For something to have intrinsic value, they argue, it must have a good of its own. Otherwise, we cannot treat its good as an end in itself, which is what it means to treat something as having intrinsic value. And ecological wholes such as species and ecosystems, the critics argue, do not have a good of their own. Nussbaum makes a very similar argument as well (Nussbaum 2023, p. 110).

Some environmental ethicists who accept Callicott’s claim have responded to this argument by contending that ecological wholes such as species do have a good of their own (e.g., Smith 2016). With Nussbaum and others, I doubt the viability of such a response. The response, though, is only necessary if the premise that nothing can have intrinsic value without having a good of its own is correct. The Christian Platonic picture has no need for such a premise. Value consists of reflecting the divine. The fact, for example, that an ecosystem has no singular good but is always changing and evolving does not prevent it from reflecting the divine. Neither does the fact that it has no definite or nonarbitrary boundaries.<sup>23</sup> All finite things only participate in the divine in partial and imperfect ways. All lack the fullness of being. All are temporal, mutable, and lack clear boundaries.

The theological picture of creaturely value I have just outlined is generous in its attributions of value. Every created thing is valuable. Rocks, fungi, trees, cats, snakes, bacteria, humans, species, planets, galaxies. Created things do not need life to be valuable. They do not need a good of their own or definite boundaries. They need only reflect the divine, which all existing things do.

#### 4. Valuing Creatures: Ethics and the Great Web of Being

The Christian Platonic theology of creaturely value just outlined offers a promising account of non-anthropocentric value of the kind that Callicott calls for, one that is able to make sense of the value of both individual entities and ecological wholes. Moreover, with its rejection of value hierarchy, it avoids the critiques of the GCB discussed in the first section. Indeed, it can articulate its own compelling critiques of value hierarchy on theological grounds.

If the view I am defending holds ethical promise, however, it also faces at least one obvious ethical objection: by rejecting value hierarchy, it seems to render all creatures, living and non-living, morally equal. Nussbaum’s two-tiered view posits a kind of moral equality among all animals, but the view I have defended includes much more than animals, opening up new problems. Does my view have to treat human interests as equal not only to bovine interests but also to dendrological, fungal, sylvian, and oceanic interests? Do we have to supplement human rights with animal rights, plant rights, bacterial rights, lunar rights, and astral rights? Such a view would certainly constitute a radically different set of relations, but it also seems too extreme to be taken seriously.

Fortunately, this objection is not as compelling as it first appears. It rests on two questionable assumptions. The first assumption is that everything with intrinsic value can be placed on a single scale, as if value is of the same kind and differs only by degree. Why assume that all value is commensurable and quantifiable (or at least capable of being ordered hierarchically)? I have already challenged this presupposition theologically. Philosophers have defended the same point on other grounds.<sup>24</sup> We can also see the problem with this assumption by thinking about many other things human beings value: arts, friendships, food, sports, music, pets, religions, games, gardens, families, and so on. Value is different in different domains. You cannot compare the value of a piece of music to that of a friend. It is not even obvious that value is of a single, quantifiable or rankable sort

within a single domain. Elizabeth Anderson gives the example of the intelligence of Bach versus the intelligence of Darwin (Anderson 1995, pp. 55–56). There is, then, no reason to simply assume that the value of living things and other ecological entities is all of the same, commensurable sort.

A second assumption is that objects of greater value make greater ethical demands on us than objects of lesser value. Again, value rarely works this way, even when goods do seem to be commensurable. I can decide that one of my friendships is of more value than another without thereby always prioritizing the one friendship above the other. And I can affirm that all children are equally valuable while still caring most about my own. If it were true that a rat was more valuable than a hawk, it would not necessarily follow that I need to protect the rat from the hawk or otherwise prioritize its well-being in my choices.

In other words, the objection assumes that ethics works roughly this way: first, figure out which things have intrinsic value and how much each has. Then, treat all the things with intrinsic value as having moral standing but prioritize them to a degree corresponding to their quantity of value. The theological picture outlined above allows us to conceive of a different relationship between value and ethics.

The question of which entities have intrinsic value has often been treated as the central question in environmental ethics.<sup>25</sup> Different views tend to be divided by how they answer this question (sentientism, biocentrism, ecocriticism, etc.). Christian Platonism attributes intrinsic value to all existing things, making it a rather unhelpful answer to the question. But perhaps the question of which things have intrinsic value should not be treated as the central question. My suggestion is that the question about which things have intrinsic value should be understood as an effort to get at the real heart of environmental ethics, the central question of which is the following: how do we properly value other entities (individuals or wholes, living or non-living, etc.)? Notice that “value” in this question is not a noun but a verb. When ethicists ask about which entities have intrinsic value, what they are asking is: Which entities are improperly treated as mere means to our own ends? Which entities place ethical limits or ethical demands on our ways of relating to them? The real issue, in other words, is about proper practices of valuing.

The problem with approaching the question of valuing through the standard distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value is that it only gives us two options, which is inadequate to guide human practices of valuing.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the two major categories of intrinsic and instrumental, ethicists sometimes also add aesthetic (e.g., Newman et al. 2009, pp. 354–86). But when we look at practices of valuing, we find remarkable diversity. Consider the following: admiring, attending, protecting, preserving, respecting, befriending, caring for, teaching, cultivating, encouraging, comforting, praising, supporting, studying, challenging, providing for, giving, being present to. Our vocabulary for practices of valuing is so much richer than our vocabulary for value, and we should not let our limited vocabulary for value limit our ethical imagination.

Let’s say, as Christian Platonic theology asserts, that an oak tree has intrinsic value.<sup>27</sup> What follows? Should we let it be? Should we let its ecosystem be? Or should we care for it, water it, enrich its soil? Should we praise it, sing to it, paint its portrait? Should we study it and teach each other about it? Should we ensure that some of its offspring succeed, or should we let nature take its course? Or should we fell it, cut it into beautiful slabs, and make the slabs into dining room tables or altars to the divine, valuing it by incorporating it into our most cherished rituals? The conclusion that an oak tree has intrinsic value does little to help us answer these questions. It might tell us some things—that we should not, for example, cut it down just to watch it fall—but not much.

This talk of valuing might seem like a step away from Christian Platonic theology. In reality, it is a different way of talking about a constitutive feature of what Andrew Davidson calls the “participatory approach to ethics” characteristic of Christian Platonism. Participatory ethics, Davidson writes, “is about love: loving good things in the right way, to the right degree, and in the right order” (Davidson 2019, p. 348).<sup>28</sup> My talk of valuing expresses the same thought in a somewhat different way: ethics is about valuing things in

the right way, to the right degree, and in the right order. Why, then, switch the language? I worry that loving sounds like something that is done alone. Valuing, as I am using the term, is a social practice that one engages through participation in a community of valuation.

The idea of valuing things in the right order will call to mind hierarchy, but it does not have to include it. To value things rightly can be to value them appropriately for what they are in their particular goodness, which is to say, divinelikeness. A participatory approach to ethics, Davidson writes, seeks goodness, which is “not encountered pure and simple” but is rather “realized in creatures, and in relations between them, in ways that accord with those creatures and their situations” (Davidson 2019, p. 348). Valuing demands attention to the particularity of each creature and the way in which we ought to enter into relations with each creature.<sup>29</sup>

Thinking about participation, Davidson argues, always entails thinking about relation: “if all things come from God, as their common source, they come forth *related*”, meaning that relatedness “is part of the constitution of creatures” (Davidson 2019, p. 367).<sup>30</sup> Asking about how to value creatures is another way of asking how to relate rightly to them—not simply as an individual but in and through relations with others as well—in view of their particular goodness. We are already related to all creatures. Those relations entail implicit or explicit modes of valuation. Part of the work of ethics is to critically assess those relations and the practices of valuing they employ in pursuit of relations that better reflect the divine goodness.<sup>31</sup>

Pabst’s defense of a Christian Platonic theology of participation is motivated in large part by the conviction that it offers a “transcendental objectivity that orders individuals and situates them in mutual relations”, which he sees as the only alternative to “Nietzsche’s will-to-power” (Pabst 2012, p. 448). Pabst is right to see in Christian Platonism a vision of participation that undergirds non-arbitrary or solely power-based relations. Pabst, though, assumes that an ontological and axiological hierarchy is necessary for such relations. My claim is that hierarchy is not necessary. What we need is the goodness of particular ways of relating and valuing. We will, no doubt, need to construct pragmatic forms of limited hierarchy, but such relations need not be justified by an ontological or axiological hierarchy.

How, though, can we determine how to value and relate to other creatures if not hierarchically? The difficulty is compounded by my view that degrees of creaturely value are incommensurable. Let me offer the briefest sketch of what I see as the way forward. We can begin with our practices, proceeding through a process of imaginative social criticism. Let’s continue with oak trees.<sup>32</sup> In current social practices—at least those of my society—any tree growing in land that I own is my property that I can treat in any way I want. Trees can be bought and sold. The bodies of dead trees, too, can be bought and sold, and they are used to make many cherished goods: houses, floors, frames, baseball bats, furniture. They have no standing, no protection, no legal status beyond property. Yet, almost no one values them solely instrumentally. Many people love trees, admire their beauty, seek out their company in forests, climb them for enjoyment, and recognize their contribution to the community of life on Earth and to many things that matter to us: clean air, clean water, a stable climate, rich and stable soil, and so on. Some people spend their lives studying trees. Others put their bodies at risk to protect trees.

Ethical reflection can begin with these practices. We can ask, for example, whether the legal status of trees and the practices of using their bodies for human purposes is appropriate. These practices have their roots in societies and legal and ethical traditions that had very little understanding of the complex lives of trees. In recent decades, our understanding of the lives of trees has been revolutionized (Wohlleben 2016; Simard 2021). Trees, we now know, are social creatures capable of forming complex multispecies communities with other trees and other life forms, including underground fungi. They communicate with one another and, in some cases, with insects. They respond not only to temperature, light, and water but also to sounds and scents. Some now believe that we can speak of their agency, their intentions, their plans—all of which have, at least according

to some, been invisible to us who see the world in such short time spans and imagine communication only by human (or at best animal) standards (Ghosh 2021, pp. 197–98).

These new findings about trees—some of which are just scientific knowledge catching up with traditional ecological knowledge<sup>33</sup>—challenge current ethical practices. Perhaps we are wrong to treat trees merely as property just as we treat computers and kitchen sinks. But criticism alone is inadequate. What should we do differently? Should individual trees gain some sort of legal status (Stone 2010)? Or would that be a mistake? Consider Patricia Westerford's claim in Richard Powers' novel, *The Overstory*: "There are no individuals. . . Everything in the forest is the forest". (Powers 2019, p. 142; cf. Kimmerer 2013, pp. 277–78). Perhaps treating trees as individual rights-bearers would be a mistaken way to value them, imposing individualist values where individualism has no proper place. We need imagination to address such issues.<sup>34</sup> Conclusions about value alone will not give us the answers. Beginning with societies constituted as they are, how can we revise our practices of valuing? We are not aiming for a timeless ideal but trying to address the fact that our practices are failing and can be made more adequate.

This last point highlights the fact that valuing is relational; it includes not only the valued but also the community of valuers. We are not asking for some ideal way of valuing an oak tree for all valuers. We are asking about how human beings should value trees. And simply specifying our species is not enough. Different human communities and societies are situated differently with different needs, different histories of relationship to trees, and so on. These details are important to the process of criticizing and revising practices of valuing, which means that my regular use of "we" should be taken with an asterisk.

Equally important is the fact that human valuing is a social practice. Norms for valuing goods are not simply given by the world; they are constructed in communities. As Elizabeth Anderson argues, valuing a good is an expressive action: "[V]aluations are expressive states. They are bearers of meaning and subject to interpretation. Since meanings are public, I can understand my own attitudes only in terms that make sense to others" (Anderson 1995, p. 3). Without social norms, we would be unable to express our values in action—to others, but also to ourselves. As Anderson puts it, "Individuals are not self-sufficient in their capacity to value things in different ways. I am capable of valuing something in a particular way only in a social setting that upholds norms for that mode of valuation". (Anderson 1995, p. 12). And it is in such settings that practical (though not theoretical) commensuration between goods becomes possible. The commensuration is practical insofar as it is done in the context of a practical activity and with some point or aim in view (Anderson 1995, pp. 55–64).

We can clarify Anderson's point by comparing valuing with speech. Speaking is also an expressive act. But speaking intelligibly to others—and even to ourselves—is only possible when languages exist. Anderson is making the same point about human valuing: it is only possible when there are established norms that permit the expression of how one values a good. To be clear, this does not imply that the only way to value a good is to do so by some fixed, conventional standards. The social norms by which goods are valued can and should be critically evaluated and, when appropriate, revised. But even the process of criticism and revision is only possible due to the existence of norms, just as linguistic innovation occurs against the background of prior linguistic norms.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that human beings need others to value goods intelligibly can, finally, help us see why we ought to value other human beings in unique ways. Other human beings are not only good creatures who ought to be valued—although they are that. They are also fellow participants in our practices of valuing, participants without whom we would lose our distinctive human capacity to value. Other human beings are, moreover, capable of understanding and questioning how we are valuing goods. For this reason, human beings relate to—and ought to relate to—one another in a way that differs from how we relate to any other kind of creature. This distinctive form of relation entails distinctive obligations.

While I cannot develop this point in detail, a plausible implication is that human beings ought to value one another in a distinctive and particularly important manner that differs

from how we ought to value any other creature—despite the fact that human beings are not of superior value to other creatures. Degrees of value do not play a role in the argument here; the claim is about relationships.<sup>36</sup> Humans do and ought to relate to one another in distinctive ways that generate distinctive obligations, obligations that are particularly important (and so have been falsely interpreted as entailing value superiority). Thus, while I affirm with Johnson that “there is no hierarchy in the web of life”, I nonetheless maintain that human beings have distinctive and particularly important moral duties toward one another that we do not have toward other creatures, duties that explain why human beings ought to be treated as having a more expansive set of rights (in relation to one another) that are and often should be prioritized over otherwise right and good ways of valuing other creatures.<sup>37</sup>

This conclusion is important not only because it allows us to avoid seemingly absurd ethical conclusions regarding the moral equality of all things. It can also contribute an important element to the issue of countering dehumanization without further reinscribing value hierarchy. As I discussed above, several scholars have demonstrated the crucial role of devaluation via animalization in the process of racialization. One common and very reasonable response to this devaluation is to insist that one be treated according to one’s humanity. Kim and Bennett, however, raise concerns about this line of response. Kim writes that “the effort to gain full humanity by distancing from nonhuman animals. . . is a misbegotten project” (Kim 2016, p. 286). The problem is that it continues to reinscribe the hierarchy of humans over non-humans, which only further reinforces racial devaluation.

Strategically, Kim’s point may very well be correct. Ethically, however, the view defended in this paper suggests that human beings are not mistaken when they insist on being valued as human beings. If, as I have argued, creaturely value does not consist of a hierarchy, then the insistence that one be valued for what one is does not entail the devaluation of any other being. It is simply an insistence that one be valued appropriately, an insistence that would be properly made about any creature. Every creature should be valued for what it is. While racist attempts to identify some human beings with non-human animals should not carry the same derogatory force in my view (since they do not entail any diminishment in value), they nonetheless remain deeply problematic insofar as they entail that forms of valuing appropriate for non-human animals are also appropriate for some human beings. They are not.

Even when human beings insist on especially important treatment because they are human beings, they need not do so by assuming their superior value. They can do so because they are human beings speaking to other human beings about how to value one another within their shared, intersubjective social practices of valuing.<sup>38</sup> Thus, assertions that one be valued according to one’s humanity remain ethically sound—though with the important caveat that what it means to be valued according to one’s humanity, if humanity is to be something other than Wynter’s “Man”, is a question that deserves continual reevaluation, no less than does the same question about oak trees. Indeed, as we criticize and reimagine how to value and relate to oak trees and other creatures, we are in that very process criticizing and reimagining what it means to be human. This reality is, I think, the truth behind Anna Tsing’s claim that human nature “is an interspecies relationship” (Tsing 2012, p. 144). And in better realizing the full relationality of human life within the web of creaturely life, we are seeking to more perfectly participate in the divine life as the particular kind of creature that we are.

## 5. Conclusions

Value hierarchies like that of the GCB have justly come under sustained criticism. They have functioned to justify and maintain anthropocentrism, environmental degradation, and human domination of other animals. Likewise, they have played an important role in colonialism and racialization, providing a value hierarchy through which human beings that do not conform to “Man” can be located on a spectrum toward “animal” and thus deemed less valuable.

Working from these critiques, I have argued that rejecting value hierarchy does not require us to reject the Christian Platonic theology with which it developed. In fact, Christian Platonic theology can itself offer a compelling critique of value hierarchy. I have argued that Christian Platonic theology fits better with a non-hierarchical view of creaturely value, one in which each kind of creature reflects and participates in the divine in its own distinctive and characteristic way: a great web of being rather than a great chain.

The absence of value hierarchy, moreover, need not lead to implausible ethical results such as a requirement to treat all things—living and non—equally. It invites us to move away from thinking of the value of creatures as greater or lesser. Instead, we ought to ask about *valuing*, that is, the practices by which we treat goods as mattering. This view is relational and participatory. No created thing is of merely instrumental value. Nonetheless, each kind of thing is distinctive and ought to be valued as such. Human beings form societies in which we develop shared practices of valuing, practices on which all of us depend. The distinctive relationships between humans in these practices of valuing give rise to distinctive and particularly important obligations to one another, obligations that we do not need to appeal to our superior value to explain. Even while we ought to value one another in these ways, though, we ought to also critically reimagine how exactly we can and should value one another as humans, seeking to enact visions of humanity beyond Man.

Even those not convinced by the theological presuppositions of my argument might still gain from the focus on practices of valuing. As I have argued, we have a much richer vocabulary for valuing than we do for types of value. Shifting from talking about kinds and degrees of value to talking about practices of valuing offers a fruitful way to move beyond established impasses in environmental and animal ethics. It also provides a fruitful way forward for those seeking constructive ethical possibilities beyond value hierarchy and those wanting to more explicitly recognize the interconnections between interhuman relations and relations between humans and other creatures.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, many different ways of conceiving this hierarchy, and no single formulation can encompass them all. I am seeking to articulate the matter in a common but by no means universal manner.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of the *scala naturae* as a tree was not without precedent. Porphyry's *Isagoge* offered a version of the *scala praedicamentalis* that took on the image of a tree. The meaning of the tree, however, was markedly different. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to the Porphyrian Tree.

<sup>3</sup> A Google Scholar search on 15 March 2024 finds over one thousand texts citing Lovejoy since the year 2020.

<sup>4</sup> The elimination of Neo-Platonic emanation does away with the need for a descending hierarchy from the divine. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is thus important to the distinctive character of the medieval vision of the GCB.

<sup>5</sup> Lori Marino, an expert in animal intelligence and behavior, argues that the *scala naturae* continues to shape modern thought. For example, she points to the common idea that some living creatures can be understood as more primitive ancestors of others (Marino 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Safina (2016, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> See Ackerman (2017).

<sup>8</sup> Though some of his claims are contestable, no one has done more to encourage people to take seriously the incredible capacities of trees than Peter Wohlleben. See Wohlleben (2016).

<sup>9</sup> See Sheldrake (2020).

<sup>10</sup> Another example appears in Jenny Offill's novel, *Weather*: "Sylvia tells the audience that the only reason we think humans are the height of evolution is that we have chosen to privilege certain things above other things. For example, if we privileged the sense of smell, dogs would be deemed more evolved. After all, they have about three hundred million olfactory receptors in their noses compared with our six million. If we privileged longevity, it would be bristlecone pines, which can live for several thousand

years. And you could make a case that banana slugs are sexually superior to us. They are hermaphrodites who mate up to three times a day” (Offill 2020, pp. 46–47).

- 11 Nussbaum makes no distinction between an ontological and an axiological hierarchy. Given her focus on ethics, though, it is quite clear that her primary target is axiological hierarchy.
- 12 I am certainly not arguing that there is no path. Christine Korsgaard agrees that value is not an inherent feature of the world, and she nonetheless defends a robust set of claims in animal ethics. But Korsgaard is able to do so with a set of arguments about why animals do and should impose value on the world, arguments that are lacking in Johnson. The real difficulty is not the lack of realism about value. The real difficulty is the absolute refusal of moral judgment. See (Korsgaard 2018).
- 13 In her political theory, Nussbaum avoids the language of intrinsic value. Instead, she makes a distinction between sentient creatures, who are “subjects of justice,” and non-sentient creatures, who are not. She does, however, believe that sentient creatures have intrinsic value. She just wants to avoid metaphysics in her political theory (Nussbaum 2023, pp. 100–1).
- 14 Nussbaum implies in a passing remark about plants that non-sentient creatures have more than merely instrumental value even though justice does not apply to them (Nussbaum 2023, p. 152). Developing this thought would bring her view much closer to mine. She also says that the “natural environmental” has instrumental and intrinsic value. I am unsure what she has in mind here, but it suggests that her two-tiered system of justice might be nuanced by a wider ethical picture.
- 15 Aph Ko’s argument here goes beyond mere “devaluation” to argue that white supremacy is a form of witchcraft seeking to possess (in multiple senses) both racialized and animal bodies. See Ko (2019).
- 16 Hildegard of Bingen, for example, puts an interestingly ecological twist on a strongly hierarchical vision of creation shaped by Christian Platonism. Anna Miriam Minore offers a nuanced treatment of the ambiguities of Hildegard’s theology in relation to environmental ethics (Minore 2002).
- 17 Wynter and Kim are focused on the way it functions to justify human oppression. There is also the question of its impacts on non-humans and the Earth more broadly. The question of the extent to which religious anthropocentrism is the cause of the current environmental crisis is highly contested, and I will make no effort to address it here. The claim was made most famously by Lynn White, Jr. (White 1967). For a helpful overview of the debate that has ensued, see Elspeth Whitney’s “Lynn White Jr.’s ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis’ After 50 Years” (Whitney 2015).
- 18 There are many different ways this view can be worked out. I keep my discussion rather generic rather than get into the weeds. The view I described is informed especially by Thomas Aquinas, who provides an especially compelling and influential version of value and divinelikeness. For an insightful and accessible discussion, see Andrew Davidson, *Participation in God* (Davidson 2019, pp. 84–112).
- 19 For a contemporary account of divinelikeness that includes not only entities but also excellences of many kinds, see Adams (1999, pp. 28–38).
- 20 I am thinking here of a hierarchy of kinds. The explanation for why some within a particular kind (e.g., human beings) might have greater being and thus goodness through their perfection is clear enough. Why this metaphysical result should have hierarchical political consequences, though, remains unclear to me.
- 21 Pabst also has political reasons for wanting a hierarchical account. I discuss this below.
- 22 I am following the language of Jonathan Newman, Gary Varner, and Stefan Linquist (Newman et al. 2009).
- 23 Newman, Varner, and Linquist (Newman et al. 2009, pp. 289–99) provide a helpful discussion of why these issues create problems for non-Platonic accounts of intrinsic value.
- 24 I am especially indebted to Elizabeth Anderson’s way of understanding the incommensurability of goods (Anderson 1995, pp. 55–64). For an overview of debates about incommensurability, see the introduction to Andersson and Herlitz (2022).
- 25 Dale Jamieson writes: “This concept [of intrinsic value] has been especially important in environmental ethics. What is intrinsic value? Intrinsic value is the ‘gold standard’ of morality. Just as gold is what is of ultimate monetary value, so what is of intrinsic value is what is of ultimate moral value. In the case of both money and morality, other things obtain their value by their relations to what is of ultimate value” (Jamieson 2008, p. 69). In his introduction to environmental ethics, Attfield writes that intrinsic value “supplies ethics with its grounding and its motivation” (Attfield 2019, p. 28). Determining what has intrinsic value is then the first and most important task of environmental ethics.
- 26 Dale Jamieson has done some important work seeking to complicate the intrinsic/instrumental distinction, on which, he writes, “environmental philosophers have tended to fixate” (Jamieson 2008, p. 153). My sense, though, is that his efforts continue to be constrained by the language available for types of value. The more you distinguish, the further you move the ethical theorization from ordinary language. Focusing on valuing, as I argue below, opens up a rich vocabulary. See Jamieson (2008, pp. 68–75, 153–80).
- 27 For a fascinating treatment of the individual and ecological intricacies of oak trees, see Tallamy (2021).
- 28 This idea, of course, is rooted in the teachings of Jesus and received its most influential expression in the words of Augustine (1996, pp. I.27–30).
- 29 Davidson writes that participation is “a profoundly outward-directed philosophy, taking particular people, things, and situations in the world seriously, precisely in their particularity” (Davidson 2019, p. 350).



- 30 This is an aspect of Pabst's defense of Christina Platonism that I think is exactly right.
- 31 My thinking here is partially informed by Lori Gruen (2013). We are, as she says, always already entangled with others. Her entangled empathy is one way to ethically navigate these relationships. I want a wider picture of something like "entangled valuing".
- 32 Why oak trees? The example is somewhat arbitrary but not without reason. I am interested in trees as an example because of the recent revolution in our understanding of them. Oak trees, in particular, are of interest not simply in their own right but as a keystone species in my region, which adds numerous complexities regarding their relationships not only to human beings but also to other forms of life (Tallamy 2021).
- 33 See, for example, Robin Wall Kimmerer's description of the way in which "old-growth cultures" understood and related to Cedar trees in the old-growth forests of the American West (Kimmerer 2013, pp. 277–92).
- 34 As an example, see Sumana Roy's beautifully imaginative *How I Became a Tree* (Roy 2017). See also the essays and poetry in the collection, *The Intelligence of Plants* (Ryan et al. 2021).
- 35 This point about the need for social practices of valuation concerns human valuing. God, in the Christian Platonic tradition, is also a valuer, though God will not require the same sorts of practices as human beings. The fact that God is a valuer might lead one to assume that God's valuing is the objective standard by which human valuing should be measured. The problem with this is that it assumes that all rational beings will value in the same way. God is not a human being, and God's relation to all created things is different from our relation to created things. For this reason, God's valuing is not necessarily the same as ours. For a description of how this can work within Christian Platonism (though without the language of valuing), see Darr (2023, pp. 43–48). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.
- 36 The turn to distinctive relationships also provides one possible response to the objection that humans are made in the *imago dei*. The *imago dei* might be explained in terms of a distinctive relationship between God and human beings that does not require reference to unique human capacities or values. For an account along these lines, see Miller (2011).
- 37 I cannot develop the full argument here. The core thought comes from Darwall (2009). Darwall argues that obligations arise from second-personal relations, which are relations in which parties make claims on one another's conduct and will. This type of relation is one in which humans stand with other humans, and the obligations to which it gives rise are constituted by distinctive moral reasons to act in particular ways in relation to other humans. I am not denying the possibility that humans can have second-personal relations with other creatures. I am only asserting that such relations are always appropriate in intrahuman cases and thus explain the distinctive and particularly important ways in which humans ought to value one another.
- 38 One important objection raised by an anonymous reviewer is that the turn to valuing within distinctive relations rather than based on value hierarchy could itself give rise to racist forms of valuing. This is certainly true. Despite the widespread affirmation of human equality, racism continues to be a pervasive feature of social life. This is one reason why I think focusing on valuing (in its fully social dimensions) rather than value is more fruitful. My argument is not that focusing on valuing will in itself resolve unjust modes of valuing. Those modes of valuing need to be contested and revised.

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