Thinking about the Rights of Nature: Value, Responsibility, and Relationships.

1. Introduction: A Unified Account of RoN

The Rights of Nature (RoN) movement is defined by diversity. Across the globe, nature's rights have been recognised through a wide variety of legal and social means.[1] Consider just a small selection of prominent cases. In 2008, the new Ecuadorian constitution enshrined the rights of Nature *as a whole* (or Pacha Mama), with rights including the right to existence and the right to restoration.[2] Soon after, nature's rights were recognised through legal reform in Bolivia, with the passing of the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth in 2010. The rights this new law recognised included nature's rights to life, equilibrium, and restoration.[3] Elsewhere, an ecosystem approach to RoN has been adopted. In Aotearoa New Zealand, since 2014 several ecological entities – a river, a forest, and a mountain – have been awarded legal personhood, with all the associated rights.[4] Other countries have followed suit; for instance Colombia's Constitutional Court established the legal personhood of the Atrato river in 2016, and Mar Menor Lagoon became the first water body in Europe to have legal rights in 2022.[5]

The diversity of the RoN movement has only increased as it has spread. In the UK, RoN have found expression at the regional level through grassroots activism and local authorities

[1] See (Boyd, 2017) for an accessible introduction to RoN, and (Kauffman & Martin, 2021) for a more academic overview of the major global RoN cases. O'Donnell (2020) provides a very good overview of some of the key river rights cases.
[2] (Constitución Política de La República Del Ecuador, 2008). See (Gutmann, 2021).
[3] (Lay de Derechos de La Madre Tierra, Ley 071, 2010). The 2010 Law was upgraded to the Framework Law of Mother Earth and Integral Development for Living Well in 2012 (Ley Marco de La Madre Tierra y Desarrollo Integral Para Vivir Bien, 2012).
[4] E.g. (Te Urewera Act 2014, 2014), (Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017, 2017). (Cribb et al., 2024; Macpherson, 2021; Winter, 2021).
[5] (Mar Menor Act 2022 - Ley 19/2022, 2022; Tierra Digna v. Presidencia de Colombia Sentencia T-622/16, 2016) See (Wesche, 2021).

recognising the rights of specific rivers.[6] Another unique feature of the UK RoN landscape concerns the empowerment of representatives or "guardians" to speak in the interests of nature on corporate boards, catchment partnerships and other decision-making structures.[7] In continental Europe, the RoN movement has found expression in national campaigns, such as the Icelandic campaign to elect a glacier as president, and in new informal organisations, such as the parliament of the Loire River and the Embassy of the North Sea.[8]

As this brief and incomplete list of cases demonstrates, the movement to recognise nature's rights is far from heterogeneous. Nature's rights have been granted through acts, bills, charters, constitutions, laws, and more. Rights are granted to Nature as a whole, to specific ecological entities, and in some cases to specific species.[9] The rights awarded range from very broad, such as the right to exist, to highly specific, such as the right to have a voice within certain decision-making structures. What is it which unifies all these apparently distinct approaches under the common banner of "rights of nature"?

Faced with such a diversity of cases and approaches, we might suspect that a mistake has been made in categorising them all under the label "rights of nature". Many theorists working on RoN instead make hard distinctions between rights of Nature approaches (seen in Ecuador and Bolivia), legal personality approaches (seen in Aotearoa, Colombia, and Spain), Nature in the boardroom approaches (seen in the UK and elsewhere), and others.[10] Making these distinctions has the benefit of being theoretically neat, as well as avoiding the risk of homogenizing the diversity of cultural and legal specifics of each case. However, there are drawbacks. Such hard distinctions ignore the ways in which, historically, the different approaches have influenced each other – such as local charters in the UK citing legal personhood cases in Aotearoa as inspiration. It overlooks (as I shall go on to argue) the conceptual and motivational commonality between cases. The stated motivations, values, and ambitions articulated by the main actors behind the different approaches often show remarkable similarity, even when the methodology and the cultural and legal context changes. And, practically speaking, it risks fragmenting an already fragile international movement into a disparate collection of independent initiatives.

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[6] The first of these was the river Ouse, in Lewes, Sussex. In February 2025, a charter recognising the rights of the River Ouse was supported by Lewes Council. A copy of the charter, the case of the declaration of the charter, and more information can be found here: https://loveourouse.org/rights-of-rivers/.

[7] The first company to legally appoint "Nature" – in the form of a representative – as a director on the board was *Faith in Nature* in 2023. Find details here: https://www.faithinnature.co.uk/pages/avotefornature. Subsequently, public bodies like the Usk Catchment Partnership and Wye Nutrient Management Board have appointed nature representatives.

[8] The European Confluence of Water Bodies brings together the various groups across Europe attempting to achieve RoN in their region. See https://water-bodies.eu/.

[9] For example, the Andean bear: Smallwood-Miller (in press).

[10] For instance, Maloney & Siemen (2015, p. 17) define "rights of nature" in terms of a specific intellectual tradition influenced by Thomas Berry (Berry, 1999) and Cormac Cullinan (Cullinan, 2011) and therefore rule out cases in Aotearoa as being examples of RoN. They thus define away any diversity of intellectual approach within the RoN movement. See also (Macpherson, 2022, pp.7-8),for the claim that legal personality approaches adopted in Aotearoa New Zealand should not be counted as "rights of nature" cases. In comparison, Kauffman & Martin (2021, pp. 14–15) present these as two models of rights of nature laws: the Nature's Rights model and the Legal Personhood model.

It is the aim of this chapter to provide a clear account of the common concepts and motivations which unify these different approaches to recognising nature's rights, without diminishing the diversity which is a feature and strength of the RoN movement. To do so, I identify two core aspects or "pillars" which all RoN initiatives share (§2). The first pillar is *valuational*. A distinctive feature of all RoN approaches is that they recognise the non-instrumental value of natural entities. A rights-bearer is a *subject*, the wellbeing, interests, and value of which are to be taken seriously for their own sake, rather than an *object* which can be used, owned, and exploited for our purposes. A unique and defining feature of RoN is that we owe duties directly *to* rights-bearing natural entities, rather than merely duties *regarding* them (§2.1). The second pillar is *representational.* As nature cannot represent its own rights in legal and social contexts, representatives, guardians, or proxies are appointed to speak on behalf of its interests. Typically, it is indigenous peoples and local communities who are best placed to act as nature representatives (§2.2). As I will go on to argue, these pillars are definitional. We have reason for calling any approach which does justice to both pillars a "rights of nature" approach, and reason to think that any theoretical account of RoN which ignores one of the pillars is deficient (§2.3).

One of the benefits of this two-pillar account of RoN is that it allows us to understand and answer some of the prominent criticisms of the RoN movement. Here I focus on criticisms which are broadly *internal*, by which I mean criticisms which agree on many of the environmental and political aims of RoN but disagree that awarding rights to natural entities is the best way of achieving them. These critics often point to two features which, they suggest, RoN cannot do justice to: the *relationality* of communities' interactions with and valuation of nature; and the felt *responsibilities* we have towards natural entities. I'll suggest that once we have a clear concept of what rights are, and an account which does justice to the two pillars of valuations and representation, we can provide a clear answer to these concerns. I argue that in fact notions of relationality and responsibility are central to the ways in which we should understand the rights of nature. Rights *always* entail concurrent responsibilities to respect those rights, and rights *are* relationships between members of a moral and legal community. There are no rights without responsibilities, and there are no rights without relationships (§3). Nonetheless, though this might answer the letter of the internal critics' concerns, I suspect they might not address the spirit of them. So, in the final section, I say more about why this might be the case, and the limitations of the language of rights (§4).

2. *The Two Pillars of the Rights of Nature*

As suggested above (§1), despite the diversity of approaches taken towards recognising nature's rights, all RoN approaches have the following two features:

1. The *Valuational* Pillar. The recognition that nature has a non-instrumental value, which is not reducible to human purposes. Nature is a subject of rights, to which we owe direct duties, not an object to be owned or utilized solely for human ends.

2. The *Representational* Pillar. The appointment of representatives to speak on behalf of nature's rights and interests. Typically, this involves the empowerment of local communities or indigenous groups who have existing relationships of care with their natural environment.

The first pillar involves a moral attitude or ethical standpoint, which I express as recognising the *intrinsic value* of nature.[11] When we recognise Nature's rights, it becomes a member of our moral and legal community, not just a resource to be prudently managed and distributed within it.[12] The second pillar involves the practicality of appointing representatives to speak and act on nature's behalf. I'll say something in more detail about each of these pillars (§2.1, §2.2), before arguing that any account of RoN which focuses on only one at the expense of the other misses what is distinctive about RoN (§2.3).

2.1. The Valuational Pillar

One of the most distinctive features of RoN approaches is the recognition of the non-instrumental or *intrinsic* value of nature. Most other approaches to environmental law and conservation aim to protect nature only because doing so benefits human beings. For instance, laws limiting pollution in rivers are concerned with protecting the drinking water and leisure spaces which citizens rely on, not with the health of the river itself. In this way, natural entities are treated as resources, property, or as objects which have *instrumental value* for human actors. RoN approaches challenge this assumed instrumentalism: natural entities are recognised as valuable for their own sake, independent of the benefits they provide to human beings. This is what I mean by "intrinsic value".

We can find this valuational aspect explicitly articulated in the documents which enshrine, interpret, and support RoN. For instance, the first right recognised in the Ecuadorian Constitution is the right to "integral respect of [nature's] existence".[13] Te Awa Tupua or the Whanganui River Settlement recognised certain "intrinsic values" including the river as a spiritual entity, and an indivisible living whole.[14] The Act granting Te Urewera legal personhood recognised its 'intrinsic worth' and unique spiritual value.[15] The Constitutional Court of Colombia recognises the 'intrinsic value' of species and ecosystems, as well as their necessity to human well-being.[16] The proposed Peruvian Bill on the rights of nature recognises non-human rights-holders because 'they are living entities, with intrinsic and universal

[11] This is something of a vexed term in environmental literature, and I'll say more about what I mean by "intrinsic value" below (§2.1).
[12] I say more about this in a forthcoming chapter in an edited collection, "Property and Paradigms: The Transformative Evaluative Shift of the Rights of Nature".
[13] (Constitución Política de La República Del Ecuador, 2008)
[14] (Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017)
[15] (Te Urewera Act 2014) Sections 1.3.1; 1.3.8; 1.4.
[16] (Tierra Digna v. Presidencia de Colombia Sentencia T-622/16, 2016). Section 5.3.

value'.[17] The Case for the River Ouse Charter explicitly recognises that rivers have 'their own intrinsic worth, regardless of their instrumental worth to humans'.[18] Whilst terminology varies across context – 'inherent value' is often used synonymously, for instance – a commitment to what I am calling intrinsic value remains constant.

What do we mean when we claim that nature is "intrinsically valuable"? Put simply, when something is taken to have intrinsic value, it is treated as being valuable *for its own sake* or taken as an "end in itself".[19] Despite lots of ink being spilt about intrinsic value, this is I believe what most prominent environmental philosophers and activists mean when they talk about intrinsic value.[20] Ultimately, the terminology we use isn't important. What matters is the common moral attitude these terms are pointing towards, an attitude in which nature is seen as valuable in its own right, worth caring for and protecting regardless of the use which human beings might have for it. The opposite of intrinsic value in this sense is *instrumental value*, or the value which something has insofar as it furthers our own interests, goals, or aims. As I will go on to explain later, there is nothing stopping us from practically using those things we find intrinsically valuable. It is just that recognition of their intrinsic value places limits on *how* we can use them (§3).

Intrinsic value, in the way I have been talking about it here, is a necessary feature of certain moral attitudes, like love, care, and respect. When we love something, we see the object of our love as worth being with, acting for, and protecting for its own sake, regardless of any instrumental benefits which we might gain from that relationship.[21] If I claim to love my partner whilst they support me financially, but dump them as soon as they lose their job, then you would rightly suspect that I had never loved them in the first place. Treating someone in this mercenary way is incompatible with an attitude of love, which involves seeing the other as valuable as an end in themselves, independent of the many benefits we might get from that loving relationship. Similarly, when we care for someone or something, we are naturally responsive to their needs and interests, and do not need any further reason to act to benefit them or further their wellbeing. If a parent only cared for their child because it gave them personal satisfaction to have someone be wholly reliant on them, or because they desired the status which parenthood gave them in the eyes of others, then they would be caring only for themselves.[22] True care requires we see the welfare of another as valuable for its own sake, not for what it gives us. Again, when we respect someone or something, we see them as having a particular status such that they deserve certain kinds of treatment for their own sake.[23] Loving, caring for, and respecting something is incompatible with seeing that thing *solely* as a tool or

[17] (La Ley Que Reconoce Derechos de La Madre Naturalexa, Los Ecosistemas y Las Especies - Ley No. 6957/2020-CR, 2021). Article 1.
[18] The final version of this document is accessible on the Love Our Ouse website: https://loveourouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/The-Case-for-a-Declaration-on-the-Rights-of-the-River-Ouse-FINAL-30.12.24.docx.pdf
[19] This is what Korsgaard calls "final" value (Korsgaard, 2017). See also (O'Neill, 1992).
[20] Callicott, for instance, defines intrinsic value in the following way: '[n]ature has intrinsic value when it is valued … for its own sake, as an end in itself' (Callicott, 1999, p. 248).
[21] See, e.g.,(Velleman, 1999)
[22] See, e.g.,(Frankfurt, 1998)
[23] See, e.g.,(Darwall, 1977)

resource to use for our benefit. RoN approaches explicitly or implicitly encourage us to adopt such moral attitudes towards natural entities, by recognising them as intrinsically valuable.[24]

This is a distinct break from the anthropocentrism assumed by other approaches to environmental law and conservation. "Anthropocentrism" is the view that only human beings have moral significance, or that humans are the only beings who can make direct moral claims on our behaviour. All other objects have value only insofar as they relate to human purposes.[25] Anthropocentric thinkers can recognise that human wellbeing is dependent on a healthy and non-polluted environment, and on a stable climate and ecosystem. As such, even anthropocentricism can provide us with good reasons for engaging in environmental protection.[26] But, by definition, all anthropocentric approaches are committed to the idea that non-human entities have moral significance only insofar as they relate to human wellbeing. RoN is distinctive precisely because it recognizes natural entities as having moral importance in their own right, and as making direct claims upon us. This is what the valuational pillar captures.

2.2. The Representational Pillar

Even if we accept that nature does or should have rights, this is only half of the story. A river cannot take a water company to court. A mountain cannot demand that its rights are respected. A forest cannot claim compensation when its rights are violated. As such, RoN requires that certain humans act as nature representatives, "guardians" or "proxies". The representational frameworks will differ depending on the specific political and cultural contexts in which RoN takes place, and different institutional arrangements will award different powers and responsibilities to nature representatives. In essence, however, such representatives are tasked with speaking and acting on behalf of nature's interests, or (as it is sometimes put) with being the voice of nature.[27]

The presence of this representational pillar is most obvious when natural entities have been awarded legal personhood. In such cases, the legal frameworks which recognise the rights of the natural entity typically establish new institutions and representational bodies to speak on behalf of those entities. As part of the recognition of Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River) as a legal person, the office of Te Pou Tupua was established to act as the "human face and voice"

[24] Many RoN frameworks, especially those grounded in indigenous philosophies, recognise natural entities as *kin*. As I go on to explain in the next section, insofar as we love, care for, and respect kin, we see them as intrinsically valuable (§3).
[25] This is a common understanding of anthropocentrism across environmental philosophy – see for instance (McShane, 2016).
[26] E.g. (Norton, 1995)
[27] As (E. O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018) make clear, to be effective the appointed representatives must be properly resourced with time, money, and expertise, and must maintain independence from the state and corporate interests.

of the river, and act on its behalf. [28] Similarly, the act which recognised Te Urewera as a legal person in 2014 also created the Te Urewera Board, which includes members from both the Tūhoe iwi and the Crown.[29] Similar representative bodies have been set up in Spain, Colombia, and other countries, each tasked with speaking for the interests of the rights-bearing entity. Though most obvious in personhood cases, representation is also central to other forms of RoN. In the UK, river management bodies and private companies have begun to appoint nature representatives to speak in the interests of nature within decision-making structures. In places such as Ecuador, whilst in principle any citizen might take a polluter to court if they violated nature's rights, in practice it is local actors who act to represent the rights of their local environment, supported by NGOs and ecological and legal activists. This was the case when local citizens successfully protected the rights of the Vilcabamba River, which was being diverted and polluted by road construction; and when the local government took the Ecuadorian government to court for awarding mining rights in Los Cedros Cloud Forest, in violation of nature's rights.[30]

There is nothing legally unusual about appointing representatives in cases where rights-bearers cannot speak or act for themselves. This is the case, for instance, with children below a certain age, or for people who have lost capacity due to brain injury or degenerative diseases. In these kinds of case, the rights-holder must rely on a legal guardian or representative to act in their interests. This is also the case for organisational rights-bearers such as corporations, who require legal representatives to speak for their interests. As such, there is no theoretical or practical barrier to nature's rights also being represented in this way. Nonetheless, there remain serious moral, philosophical, and political questions about who counts as a legitimate representative for a natural entity, and how this representation is best embedded in existing institutional structures.

In most countries which have established RoN within legal frameworks, it is indigenous peoples who are appointed to the role of nature representatives, or new bodies are created with a combination of indigenous and state representatives. There are good political reasons why this is the case. Indigenous groups have ancestral connections to certain rivers, forests, or environments, and were forcibly removed from practical relationships with those natural entities through a combination of colonization, industrialisation, and privatization. RoN approaches can be an effective way of empowering indigenous groups to once again have more direct management over the ecological entities they have historical, cultural, and practical relationships with, and to be integrated into the decision-making structures from which they have been excluded.[31]

However, there are also good reasons to think that indigenous peoples are *best placed* to act as representatives of nature's interests. I'll mention three of these reasons, though I cannot argue for them convincingly here. First, those who live in existing concrete relationships with a

[28] (Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017). See (Cribb et al., 2024; Winter, 2021). See the Tu Pou Tupua website for a clear articulation of their role as the "face and voice" of the river (https://www.tepoutupua.nz/)
[29] (Te Urewera Act 2014, 2014)
[30] See (Berros, 2017; Peck et al., 2024).
[31] See, e.g., (E. O'Donnell et al., 2020).

natural entity are uniquely positioned to *understand* what it needs, and what actions are required to further or protect its interests. Those who live with or along a river, for example, are likely to be the first to know when it has been polluted, when fish populations are struggling, or when the flow has been diverted, and what might be done to remedy the situation. Secondly, those who live in concrete relationships of care with a natural entity are properly *motivated* to act in its interests. Just as a child's guardian is best placed to know what the child needs, and to be motivated to respond to those needs, so indigenous and local communities are often best placed to know and be motivated to act on the needs of their river (or mountain, or forest, etc.). Indeed, for many such groups the interests of the entity and the interests of the community are intimately connected. Consider, for instance, the saying of the Whanganui iwi: *Ko au te Awa, ko te Awa ko au* "I am the River and the River is me".[32] As the cultural identity and wellbeing of these groups is so connected with the natural entity, then they are strongly motivated to act in its interests. Thirdly, indigenous philosophy and cosmology is typically much more accepting of the idea that a river (or mountain, or forest) might be morally significant, and that we can have relationships of responsibility and duty with such entities. Those groups who have grown up with and act with this philosophy as a background set of assumptions, then, will find it much easier to relate to nature as a subject, rather than as a resource. This might be significantly more difficult for those who have grown up with and act with a naturalistic philosophy as a background set of assumptions, on which nature is typically seen as a resource or object of property.

As RoN finds more purchase in western countries, which do not have recognised indigenous populations, the question arises as to who is best placed to speak on behalf of nature's interests in those contexts. I believe that local communities – those who live in concrete relationships of care with natural entities – are often best positioned to know what that natural entity needs, and be properly motivated to act in its interests, and so meet at least two out of three of these reasons. But making this case convincingly is a task for another day.[33]

2.3. Taking Both Pillars Seriously

Taken together, the valuational and representational pillars of RoN create a highly distinctive approach to environmental law and management. We can see both aspects articulated clearly in the ruling by the Constitutional Court of Colombia which recognised the Atrato River as a legal person:

> [T]he human species is only one more event within a long evolutionary chain that has lasted for billions of years and [humans] therefore, in no way, are the owner of

[32] This saying has been enshrined in the legal documents granting the river legal personhood. (Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017) Section 13c.

[33] In countries like Ecuador, ecologists and environmental scientists have often played significant roles in defining rights and arguing for nature's rights in court. The relationship between ecological knowledge and local knowledge about ecosystems in the context of legitimate nature representation, is an interesting and underexplored one.

> other species, biodiversity or natural resources, or the fate of the planet … [c]onsequently … nature [is] a true subject of rights that must be recognised by states and exercised under the tutelage of their legal representatives, for example, by the communities that inhabit it or have a special relationship with it.[34]

Here the court recognised both the independent moral significance of nature, which compels the state to recognise nature's rights, *and* that those communities who have existing relationships of care with natural entities are best placed to represent those rights.

Any account of RoN which focuses on only one of these pillars, at the expense of the other, will be deficient. We can see this in two ways. Firstly, many of the prominent criticisms of RoN are responsive to only one of these pillars and become far less convincing when we keep both in mind. Secondly, even positive accounts of RoN which prioritize only one pillar tend to miss what is distinctive about RoN. Let's consider some examples.

One prominent criticism of the RoN movement is that it is too "ecocentric", or "nature-centred", and will therefore lead to the sacrifice of human rights, and the rights of indigenous communities, upon the alter of an abstract concept of wild nature. Luque-Lora puts this kind of criticism very clearly in a popular article expressing scepticism about RoN:

> "The rights of nature are based on biocentric or ecocentric philosophies […] [T]he very point of rights is that they are inviolable, so that recognising the rights of nature would in principle entail non-negotiable bans on using non-humans as resources"[35]

Luque-Lora's concern is two-fold: that RoN is an ecocentric philosophy and so would prioritize nature's rights over human rights when conflicts occurred, and that this would lead to those indigenous groups and local communities who rely upon natural resources to be forbidden from using them. This kind of concern is shared by many scholars inside and outside of the RoN literature.[36] I'll respond to the concern about ecocentrism here, and return to the issue of legitimate use of rights-bearing natural entities below (§3).

The first thing to say is that RoN is not committed to ecocentrism or biocentrism, at least as those positions are commonly understood. Recognising the rights of nature requires that we accept natural entities as morally significant in their own right (§2.1). This entails the rejection of anthropocentrism, but does entail ecocentrism. Granting nature rights does not require a shift to being "nature-centred" any more than recognising the rights of women made western society "woman-centred". The aim of RoN is not to replace one "centre" with another, but to broaden the moral and legal community by recognising the importance and status of those who were previously excluded from it.

Concerns about "ecocentric" approaches do not come from nowhere. There is a history of conservationists who aim to protect nature by removing all human interactions with it.

[34] (Tierra Digna v. Presidencia de Colombia Sentencia T-622/16, 2016)
[35] (Luque-Lora, 2022)
[36] See, e.g. (Tănăsescu, 2022, p. 101).

Historically, western conservationists often have a binary conception of "nature" which is defined against "human", so that any human presence within an ecosystem *de facto* makes it unnatural. Such conservationists imagine that the only kind of relationships which humans can have with the natural world are the exploitative and damaging relationships which privatisation and industrialisation incentivize. They do so in ignorance of the fact that indigenous societies were often existing in mutually beneficial relationships with the natural world for centuries before western colonization.[37] When enforced, such conservationist polices can facilitate and legitimize the removal of indigenous groups from their ancestral homelands, and so perpetuate colonial injustice, with the expressed intention of respecting the intrinsic value of nature.[38] As such, these communities have good reason to be suspicious of approaches which appear "ecocentric" in this way.

An approach to RoN which focused *solely* on the valuational pillar would risk being another "top-down" approach to conservation, which prioritized an abstracted notion of intrinsic value at the expense of existing relationships of care. Taking such an approach would ignore the second pillar, and the importance of empowering local communities and indigenous peoples to represent the interests of a natural entity. Once we recognise the equal importance of representation, and of doing justice to communities' relationships with natural entities, then the criticisms of RoN which focus on "ecocentrism" lose their force. The ecocentric approaches to conservation such critics are concerned to avoid are not only politically dubious and culturally insensitive, but also philosophically confused. They rely on the idea that nature somehow has its intrinsic value *independently* of the lived relationships within which that value is perceived, actualised, and appreciated. But value is a verb, not a noun. For something to have value means that it is *valued* by those living beings who exist in relation to it.

Sensitive to the concerns attached to ecocentric approaches, many theorists respond by downplaying or rejecting the valuational pillar and instead emphasize the representational or political aspects of RoN. MihneaTănăsescu, for instance, provocatively claims that the rights of nature are "not about nature, but rather about the political relations between different groups of people' (Tănăsescu, 2021, p. 69).[39] Though asserting that nature's rights are not about nature sounds contradictory, Tănăsescu's account centres the empowerment of indigenous groups to once again occupy, manage, and relate to the lands they had been forcibly removed from. RoN approaches thus becomes a tool through which such communities can

[37] (Kimmerer, 2013) for the limitations of modern ecology to conceptualise mutually beneficial relationships with nature, and examples from indigenous practice of such relationships.
[38] See, e.g. (Macpherson, 2021) for the injustices associated with making Te Urewera in Aotearoa a National Park, without consultation with or consideration of the Tūhoe iwi. According to Macpherson, the "Western conservationist approach to nature has had catastrophic impacts on Indigenous peoples throughout the world who have at times, as a result, been enclosed out of traditional territories and livelihoods' (Macpherson, 2022). This is a form of what O'Donnell et al call "environmental colonialism" – or 'the imposition of a culturally specific construction of "nature", as well as a set of related normative and ethical assumptions, by those in a position of dominance upon those who are in a subordinate power relationship' (E. O'Donnell et al., 2020, pp. 412–413).
[39] See also (Macpherson, 2021) 'Te Urewera is not so much about the rights of nature, but about the rights and obligations of people' (p.175).

claim themselves to be representatives or guardians of their land, and in so doing regain some power to manage and control their own environment.[40]

Whilst these theorists are right to emphasize the political dimensions of RoN, and the clear role which indigenous peoples and their philosophies have played in the RoN movement, this focus on the representational pillar at the expense of the valuational loses sight of what is distinctive about RoN. As previously argued, RoN is unique for its recognition that natural entities are valuable for their own sake, can make direct demands upon us, and should be seen as subjects rather than objects under law. Rejecting the valuational pillar to focus solely on the representational loses this distinctiveness. RoN becomes another anthropocentric approach to nature governance, albeit one which is more aligned with a decolonial approach.

Respecting the intrinsic value of nature is central to the way established representatives view their practice. The explicit goal of the Te Pou Tupua representative body is to speak and act on behalf of the river, and to promote the "health and well-being" of Te Awa Tupua.[41] The website of this representative body acknowledge that their role is to "represent and advocate for the interests of Te Awa Tupua".[42] The mantra of the Te Urewera Management board is that "Te Kawa is about the management of people for the benefit of the land", rather than about managing the land for the benefit of the people.[43] The court order which recognised the legal personality of the Atrato river in Colombia appointed guardians with the specific purpose of 'ensuring the protection, recovery, and due conservation of the river'.[44] The Monitoring Committee of Mar Menor, responsible for ensuring that the rights of the lagoon are respected, is comprised of guardians who have previously acted in defence of the ecosystem.[45] This model increases the likelihood that those appointed to this role will independently care for the lagoon for its own sake. UK nature representatives, appointed in companies such as *Faith in Nature* are specially empowered to advocate and speak for nature's interests.[46] More generally, in countries such as Aotearoa, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia, RoN frameworks reflect indigenous philosophies which see relationships with nature as *kin* relationships, such that seeing natural entities solely as resources is morally objectionable. Such kin relationships prioritize attitudes of love, care, and respect which (I have argued) presuppose seeing the nature entity as intrinsically valuable.

[40] See also (Sanders, 2018), who argues that the 'primary purpose' of granting legal personhood in Aotearoa was to 'regulate human relationships relating to land and river (p.209), and proving 'frameworks [...] which structure relationships between the Crown and *iwi*' (p.231). Similarly, Macpherson (2021) argues that ecosystem rights in Aotearoa are primarily about a 'framework to regulate an ongoing relationship between the Crown and the *iwi*' (p.175). However, by reflecting Māori principles, values, and understandings, these frameworks also indirectly 'respect the inherent value' of the natural entities (Macpherson, 2021, p.175) and include 'the land itself as part of the framework, rather than a merely territorial limit upon it' (Sanders, 2018, p.231).

[41] (Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017, 2017), Section 19. See (Cribb et al., 2024), for interviews with the *Te Kōpuka* leadership, the strategy group for Te Awa Tupua, in which the importance of placing 'the river first' ensuring the 'health and well-being' of the river, and letting strategy 'come from the river' is emphasized by interviewees (p.12).

[42] https://www.tepoutupua.nz/

[43] Reported in (Kauffman & Martin, 2021, p. 152).

[44] (Tierra Digna v. Presidencia de Colombia Sentencia T-622/16, 2016), Order 4.

[45] (Mar Menor Act 2022 - Ley 19/2022, 2022), Article 3.

[46] (Faith in Nature, 2022)

Nature representatives, according to their own stated purposes and self-understanding, act primarily *for the sake of* the health and wellbeing of the natural entity they are appointed to speak for.[47] Taking a purely political approach to understanding RoN – on which nature's rights are *really* about navigating political relationships between human groups –would appear to undermine this. It would seem to suggest that nature representatives were, at best, confused about their own activity or, at worst, engaged in a kind of double-speak in which their stated aims and values were different from their real aims and values. Of course, separating the interests of a natural entity from those of the indigenous community which exists in a concrete relationship with that entity is often unnecessary and artificial. Relationships of care, use, and identity mean that damage to one is damage to another. This is one reason such groups are best placed to represent the interests of their rivers, mountains, and forests. But, if push comes to shove, nature representatives are empowered to speak for the interests of the natural entity not *because* this is instrumentally beneficial for them and their communities, but because the natural entity is itself deserving of respect.

As such, these two pillars of RoN are not separate, but two aspects of the same approach. Representatives act for the sake of the natural entity, and this requires recognizing its intrinsic value. Those who exist in concrete relationships of care with the natural entity are best placed to understand and be motivated to act in its interests and should be empowered to do so. The two pillars are mutually supporting. If our aim is to protect the interests and health of an ecosystem for its own sake, then the best way to do so is to empower those who exist in concrete relationships with it. If our aim is to protect the interests of indigenous peoples and local communities, then the best way to do so is to empower them to act in the interests of the ecosystem they live within and rely upon. Social and ecological justice are both served by RoN, as it embodies the idea that the health and empowerment of local communities is intimately connected with the health and empowerment of nature.

3. *Relationships, Responsibilities, and Rights*

I have argued that all accounts of RoN have at least two features in common: the recognition that natural entities have value outside of human purposes, and the importance of empowering those who exist in concrete relationships of care to represent the interests of that natural entity. Seeing RoN in this way will help diffuse some of the more prominent criticisms, especially those revolving around "ecocentrism". But is the language of "rights" best placed to capture the kind of caring relationships which people do (or should) have with nature? In this section, I'll consider two connected concerns about RoN which focus on the limitations of rights-based discourse.

[47] Some representatives might in fact use their roles to further the interests of their local human communities. One legal representative involved in the Atrato River case, for example, expressed that appointed nature guardians were "above all, representatives of their communities and only in a second place, representatives of the river" (quoted in Wesche, 2021, p. 549). But there is no evidence to suggest that this is how most nature representatives in fact think or act.

The first concern regards relationality. Those scholars who reject the idea of nature's intrinsic value, and focus instead on the political dimension of RoN, tend to also emphasize the *relational* nature of indigenous worldviews:

> [I]ndigenous philosophies are primarily *relational*, that is to say that they do not recognise intrinsic values as such but rather focus on the development of situated relationships with natural beings that are always in flux. This is also why indigenous philosophies are not, by and large, ecocentric: they do not posit a nature that is prior to its relationships, nor do they see the inherent value of nature as opposed to the use humans may make of it (Tănăsescu, 2022, p.57).

There is an apparent contrast drawn here between a (Western) view of nature as intrinsically valuable, and an (indigenous) view focused on relationships with nature. As I shall go on to argue, the dichotomy presented between having concrete relationships with nature and seeing it as intrinsically valuable is a false one. Intrinsic value does not prevent human use of nature, nor does it prevent meaningful relationships with nature. In fact, the presence of intrinsic value is a distinguishing feature of the kinds of caring relationships – marked by love, awe, respect, and care - which these accounts emphasize.[48] A connected concern is that *rights* do not capture the kinds of relationships which indigenous groups have with natural entities, and I return to this point below. Rights are seen as adversarial, abstract and static, as opposed to relationships which are interpersonal, concrete, and liable to change.[49]

The second, connected, concern, is that the language of rights is alien to indigenous worldviews, which instead prioritize the notion of moral and interpersonal responsibility. Consider the following passage reflecting on Māori Te Kawa (principles):

> The issue of rights is nowhere present in Te Kawa. Instead, it is all about the responsibility that people have to relearn ways of being in the world that are true to the particularities of place (Tănăsescu 2022, p.86)

Colloquially, in RoN circles, this is often referred to as the "responsibilities not rights" criticism. The idea is that the language of rights is a distorting imposition on worldviews which prioritize moral responsibility with nature. Here is a passage from Peter Horsely which clearly connects the ideas of relationality and responsibility:

> Indigenous systems … privilege local, community-oriented, bottom up and flexible forms of governance and lore. Its traditions assert that people are ethically obligated to always be responsible for others and the environment. They embody a politics of responsibility, not rights, that affirm relationships between people, the land, and the cosmos (Horsley, 2011, p. 106).

[48] See (O'Donnell, 2020) for the claim that an emphasis on legal rights can undermine the 'relational connection to land' which indigenous worldviews tend to prioritize. (Tănăsescu, 2020) suggests that rights of nature initiatives risk 'sidestepping' the relationality of indigenous worldviews (p.452).
[49] See (Macpherson, 2022, p.2): 'relational understandings of law depart from static notions of law and rights to focus on the process of relationships'.

Horsely contrasts such indigenous systems to rights-based systems which conversely prioritize uniformity, individualism, and public law. Rights are thus 'separated from the day-to-day sense of moral values, behaviour, and responsibility' (ibid).[50]

As such, we can see two connected criticisms, which are unified by the concern that rights language cannot do adequate justice to the concrete relationships, and concurrent sense of moral responsibility, which is central to many place-based and indigenous understandings of nature. But the concept of rights is removed from neither responsibility nor relationality. Quite the opposite: rights *are* relationships, and rights *always* entail responsibilities. Understanding exactly what rights are might help quell the force of some of these criticisms. Nonetheless, there are significant limits to the language of rights, and I return to these in the final section of the paper (§4).

Let's first consider the inherent relationality of rights. There is a wide-spread understanding of rights which holds that they are unduly individualistic, and as such they cannot do justice to the interdependence of human communities and connections with nature. Rights language seems to prioritise individual selves; we are encouraged to think of our rights as kinds of individual possessions, held in opposition to the state, society, or community.[51] But, whilst common language and use of rights encourages this individualistic interpretation, the truth is that rights always describe a *relationship* between people or groups.

This feature of rights becomes clear when we articulate what rights *are*. According to most established accounts of rights, when we say that some person or group has a *right*, what we are typically saying is that they have a *claim* right. This means that this person has legitimate claim to expect certain kinds of treatment. A claim might be legitimate in this way because of its grounding in established moral principles, because of its legal backing, or both. For instance, my legitimate claim to live free of torture is supported by basic morality (it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering to anyone), and legal frameworks (my right to live free from torture is written into international agreements of human rights). Regardless of what makes my claim legitimate, this claim only forms part of a *right* when it is sufficiently weighty to ground someone else's duty to respect it.[52] In this way, my individual claim is one-sided and useless unless it is met by an obligation on someone else's part. My legitimate claim to not be tortured is matched by other people's duty to respect this claim and not torture me. Rights require both aspects – claims and correlative duties – to be in place. As such, rights describe a *relationship* between claimants and those who have obligations to fulfil those claims.

This brings us to the notion of *responsibility*. Rights always entail responsibilities. Calling something a "right" is to describe a relationship between a legitimate claim on the one hand, and the duty or responsibility of someone else to respect that claim. My claim to be free from torture is nothing, unless others have a duty to respect that claim. All human societies will

[50] Consider also (O'Donnell, 2020): 'Rather than emphasising the new legal rights and powers of the river [...] environmental law can instead promote the interdependence between people and nature, and the responsibility we can have to care for rivers (p.659).
[51] See e.g. (Mullins & Weis, 2025).
[52] (Raz, 1986, p. 166). See (Williams, 2025).

have these relationships of claim and responsibility, even if they are not labelled "rights".[53] In practice, we use "rights" to describe relationships between particularly *weighty* interests and duties, such that they take precedence over other responsibilities. If I have promised to buy you a coffee, then when I forget to do so you have a legitimate claim to a coffee, and I have an unfulfilled responsibility to provide you with one. But to say you had a *right* to a coffee would sound extreme. According to one prominent theory of rights, rights can be set apart from other combinations of claims and responsibilities in that they protect fundamental welfare interests. My right to be free from torture protects my interest to not experience undue suffering, and this interest is central to my welfare. The connection between rights and welfare is one reason why responsibilities tied to rights will take precedence over other kinds of responsibilities.[54] What makes *legal* rights distinctive, is that they are enshrined and protected by legal systems, such that rights violations can be enforceable by the law. Any criticism to the effect that we need to focus on responsibilities rather than rights misses this central point: rights and responsibilities go hand in hand.[55]

To be a rights-bearer, then, is to exist in a relationship with others, such that you can expect certain kinds of treatment and respect from them. Rights map the topography of our moral and legal community, they indicate which claims we must take seriously, and what obligations we have to each other. This is closely related to the notion of moral and legal standing. An entity has moral standing, insofar as it can make legitimate claims on us.[56] An entity has legal standing insofar as it can initiate a legal action.[57] RoN requires that nature is seen as having both moral and legal standing. It requires moral standing, as to be a rights-bearer involves making claims on other members of a moral and legal community (§3). And, distinctively, RoN approaches give natural entities *legal standing*, in the sense that to show that a breach of duty has occurred, it is sufficient to show that the ecological entity itself has been harmed, rather than having to show that humans have been affected by ecological damage.[58] This is what sets RoN apart from other, similarly progressive forms of environmental law, such as establishing human rights to a clean environment. Even when these have similar practical ends, RoN treats *nature* as the claimant, whereas rights to a clean environment remain *human* rights.

As mentioned above (§2.3), some critics worry that granting rights to natural entities would prevent the reasonable *use* of natural resources.[59] But this is not the case. Recognising the rights of a river would not prevent locals from fishing in it. Recognizing the rights of a forest would prevent people from walking, living, or foraging within it. Neither acknowledging natural entities' intrinsic value, nor granting them legal rights, prevent us from using natural

[53] (Feinberg, 1970)
[54] See (Williams, 2025) for more on the relationship between interests and wellbeing in RoN.
[55] Consider (Magallanes, 2019), who contrasts rights approaches with responsibility approaches, arguing that though rights approaches might be useful tools, we should focus on developing 'explicit frameworks and tools of collective responsibility' which are more useful for effecting the necessary 'paradigm shift' (2019, p.217). But rights *are just* such tools. It is unclear how we might encourage such collective responsibility (when there are not already pre-existing relationships of care) without something like the formal language of rights.
[56] (Brennan, 1984).
[57] (Stone, 2010, p. 35).
[58] See (Stone 2010, p.36).
[59] See e.g. (Luque-Lora, 2022).

resources to meet our needs. What it does, however, is place clear limits on what *kinds* of use are appropriate. Respecting the value and rights of natural entities is incompatible with exploitative, damaging, or harmful use.

Good relationships of any kind require the recognition of the intrinsic value of those we are in a relationship with. This is true of relationships at work, romantic relationships, relationships with family and friends, societal relationships, and (I suggest) with relationships between humans and non-human nature. Recognising the intrinsic value of a river (or a forest, or mountain) is compatible with viewing it as *kin*. After all, our relationships with (human) kin are marked by love, care, respect for their value and seeing them as important for their own sake. These attitudes require seeing the other as intrinsically valuable. None of this prevents us from living with and relying on our loved ones for all kinds of practical and emotional support. We might borrow money from them, ask them to help us move home or decorate, phone them when we are feeling low, rely on them for childcare, and innumerable other things. What stops such relationships from being exploitative is precisely that we also see our loved ones as valuable for their own sake, not just for what they can provide us. Keeping their value in mind, we only ask of them what is consistent with their own wellbeing and flourishing, and we are willing to reciprocate and offer help when they need it. Relationships without recognition of intrinsic value are toxic relationships.

Recognition of intrinsic value does not prevent, but does place *limits*, on our use of other people and natural entities. Rights make those limits more formal, and perhaps legally enforceable. Whilst we might have concerns about this formalisation (§4), it is still the case the using natural resources is permissible providing that use is not exploitative or harmful to the natural entity. The recognition of human rights did not prevent us from relating to, engaging, employing, or otherwise relying on other human beings. But human rights do place clear limits on the ways we can use other people. Fair employment is compatible with human rights, slavery is not. Exploitation occurs when we refuse to recognize *any* limits on our use of other people or nature, when we use them *solely* as a resource, to the detriment of their wellbeing.

We do not need to think of nature's rights as absolute, such that they could *never* be overridden. Rights describe barriers to action which should not, in the normal course of things, be crossed. Overriding a right is a grave matter, and we should not normalise rights violations, or make plans which require them to be violated.[60] However, sometimes rights will come into conflict, and difficult decisions will have to be made. In such cases, nature's rights will not automatically take precedence over other rights. Sometimes they will be overridden, sometimes upheld, depending on the specifics of the case. But RoN will give nature a "seat at the table", seen as having significant interests which must be considered, rather than as a mere resource to be exploited or distributed.[61]

What this all means is that taking relationships between humans and natural entities seriously does not require that we reject either the intrinsic value of nature, or recognition of its rights.

[60] See (Sprigge, 1997, p. 118) for the idea of rights as *moral barriers*.
[61] (Winter, 2021)

Practical relationships with nature which are non-exploitative and mutually beneficial typically entail intrinsic value and are compatible with RoN.

4. *The Limits of Rights*

In the last section (§3), I presented an account on which rights are understood as relationships between those with legitimate claims and those with responsibilities to respond to those claims. This understanding provides the RoN advocate with clear responses to the two prominent criticisms of RoN. The response to the "responsibilities not rights" objection is to point out that rights and responsibilities always come as a package. The relationship between legitimate claimants and those with the responsibility to respond to them is what we formalise in the language of "rights". But these relationships of claim and responsibility are present whether we choose to give them this label or not. Rights *always* entail responsibilities. If a river is recognised as having rights, then the rest of the community has a responsibility to respect those rights. This is also the response to those who think that rights language is too individualistic and adversarial to adequately capture the concrete relationships of care which exist between humans and natural entities. Rights help us map the topography of our moral and legal community, and RoN is distinctive precisely because it formally extends the boundaries of that community to include non-human natural entities. Presented in this way, RoN might be seen as part of the "relational turn" in law, politics, and philosophy.[62]

These responses will hopefully be enough to satisfy some RoN critics. However, I suspect that others might feel that such answers respond to the letter but not the spirit of their concerns. These critics might accept everything I have said so far concerning the nature of rights, and yet still feel that something *vital* is lost when we start redescribing our relationships with, and responsibilities to, natural entities in this language. Catherine Magallanes captures this thought in the following passage:

> An ancestral relationship emphasises that we are duty-bound to care for nature as we would our grandparents. We do not talk about our grandparents having rights to be cared for by their offspring as much as we talk about our familial responsibilities towards grandparents to care for them (Magallanes, 2019, p.233).

I think the only response the RoN advocate has available to them is to be frank about the limitations of rights-language. Rights, like any other concept, are tools which are suitable for certain purposes and contexts, and unhelpful in others. We need to be clear about the usefulness and the limitations of the language of rights.

[62] (Macpherson, 2021) suggests that ecosystem rights approaches can be seen 'essentially relational' (p.183) – at least when combined with forums for collaboration and conflict, and when the richness of 'connection between people and place' is recognised (p.181).

Adopting the language of rights always marks a *failure* in a relationship of care. Let's think about it this way. When we have a caring relationship with someone – such as a parent, child, spouse, or close friend – we experience their needs and interests as naturally compelling for us. We are naturally disposed to act in their interests – we might say, act *for their sake* – not because some external authority compels us to do so, but because we experience their interests as necessities of our own will. When our child is in danger, we cannot help but feel that it is necessary to help them. When our spouse is upset, we cannot help but feel it necessary to comfort them. This feeling of *necessity* is very close to the feeling of moral duty. Necessities of love, like necessities of moral duty, are felt to emerge from our own will, from those things which we care about and feel to be most important. These necessities provide constraints on our will – they make certain actions required of us, and others forbidden. But we freely embrace and endorse these constraints; we would not wish to be free of the requirements of love and morality. Rather than being felt as impositions on our autonomy, acting according to the necessities of love and morality is experienced as an expression of our true, authentic self.[63]

This is the central difference between those responsibilities which arise naturally within relationships of care, and those that are imposed upon us by external sources such as the law. When necessities are imposed upon us from outside, they are experienced as limitations on our freedom. The language of "rights" is public and enforceable; it is the language we adopt when we need to compel someone to do something they are not naturally inclined to do. When embedded in social norms, rights identify the ways we are required to treat strangers and others we are not naturally inclined to care for, and we are blamed or sanctioned if we fail to live up to them. When embedded in legal frameworks, rights are enforceable by law, and failure to respect them might be a punishable offense. The language of care and the language of rights might describe the *same* responsibilities, but when articulated as *rights* these responsibilities are presented as an imposition by a public, social, institutional or legal authority. Speaking the language of rights, then, implies that we have abandoned the interpersonal perspective of caring relationships, and have adopted an external and public stance.

An example might make this point clearer. Consider a relationship between a parent and child. When all is going well, the parent will be naturally inclined to act in the child's interests. If the child is hungry or hurt, the parent will feel naturally compelled to feed or comfort the child. The parent will feel that sense of necessity as emerging naturally from the love and care they have for the child, and not as imposed upon them by an external authority. They endorse that feeling of necessity; it is part of what makes them who they are.[64] At no point would we feel the need to use the language of rights to explain this relationship, and the responsibilities which are a part of it. Nonetheless, the child *does* have recognised moral and legal rights, even

[63] I am drawing heavily here from a conception of love and care articulated by Harry Frankfurt (1998).

[64] I don't want to idealise parental relationships here. Necessities are different from wants. No doubt, there will be times when the parent – exhausted, frustrated, or both – will not *want* to respond to the needs of the child. This is the point of necessities; they apply in the face of our self-interested desires to do something else. Equally, necessities will not always be fulfilled. At times the parent might fail to meet their felt necessities, due to tiredness, distraction, or momentary selfishness, and might subsequently feel guilt or shame about that failure. The point is that the parent will (hopefully) experience those necessities as *internal* to their own will, as emerging from what they value and care about, and not as impositions from some *external* authority.

if they are never invoked, and this is for good reason. If the parent were to stop responding to the needs of the child, then those outside of that relationship might use rights-language to express their concern, or to appeal to the institutional processes which can protect the child. Similarly, a parent might reach for the language of rights if their society was failing to provide their child with some fundamental good. For instance, in the absence of decent education provision, the parent might appeal to their child's right to meaningful education and the state's obligation to provide it.

As these kinds of examples how, we reach for the language of rights when relationships are already strained, damaged, or broken. This is not to denigrate rights, but to acknowledge their purpose. When responsibilities are not met within relationships of care, we have recourse to the public language of rights, and the requirements, sanctions, punishments, and treatments which can be legitimately expected and claimed from each other. Perhaps in an ideal world, we would have no need for rights-language. But we do not live in an ideal world. Relationships of care breakdown, fail, or were never present to begin with. States and corporations act against or ignore the fundamental interests of individuals and communities. We live in systems which incentivize exploitative and acquisitive behaviours, often at the expense of relationships of care. So, we need the powerful and public language of rights.

Our relationships with the natural world are broken in this way. In most industrialised countries, relationships with nature are so degraded and devalued that many find it inconceivable that we might even *have* responsibilities to natural entities, let alone feel naturally compelled to meet those responsibilities. Communities who do exist in concrete relationships of care with nature, like indigenous peoples, may not need the language of rights to frame their own responsibilities to nature. Those groups might feel that the language of rights is an imposition upon them, and out of kilter with the sense of responsibility which emerges organically from their relationships of care with natural entities. Indeed, rights-language is a blunt tool, ill-suited for capturing the particularity of specific relationships or diversity of cultural understandings. But even those groups have a reason to accept nature's rights, in the same way that the caring parent has reason to accept children's rights. Recognising natural entities' rights establishes them as members of the moral and legal community, provides a bulwark against exploitation by other actors outside of relationships of care, and offers protection in cases where relationships of care are absent or breakdown. Further, for those who are not naturally compelled to feel responsibilities to nature from within relationships of care, RoN provides an external source for those responsibilities to respect and protect nature.

Rights are not replacements for our intimate relationships of care, or the responsibilities which arise within them, but they are ways of reflecting those relationships and responsibilities within formal systems. Once we understand their purpose and their limits, rights can protect nature and help change institutional structures around nature governance, without impinging on the realities of existing relationships of care.[65] Our relationships with

[65] It might be the case that – for indigenous peoples and others with existing relationships of care with nature – being forced to express these relationships in the language of rights entails a kind of "ontological submission", in which the colonial laws and worldviews come to undermine indigenous laws and cosmologies. See (Salmond,

the non-human world are broken, and until such time as they are fixed, we will require the language of rights.

5. *Conclusion*

Though the movement to recognise nature's rights is diverse and pluralistic, in this chapter I have identified two fundamental "pillars" which all examples of RoN will be committed to (§2). Firstly, all RoN approaches are committed to the idea that nature has intrinsic value, meaning that it is seen as worth protecting and respecting *for its own sake*, regardless of the benefits it might provide to human beings (§2.1). Secondly, all RoN approaches require that representatives, or representational processes, are instituted to articulate the interests of the rights-bearing entity. This typically entails the empowerment of local communities, indigenous peoples, and other previously disenfranchised groups who are best placed to speak on behalf of nature (§2.2). Focusing on only one of these pillars makes RoN vulnerable to criticism, and loses sight of what is distinctive about recognising nature's rights.

With this understanding in hand, a RoN advocate can push back against prominent criticisms. This chapter has focused on two connected criticisms: that rights cannot do justice to concrete relationships of care with natural entities, and that RoN does not capture the moral responsibilities we have towards natural entities. Contrary to these criticisms, I have argued that rights are in essence relationships of claim and responsibility within a moral and legal community (§3). Rights map the boundaries of our moral and legal community, and RoN is distinctive in that it recognizes natural entities as members of that community, rather than objects to distribute or manage within it.

Nonetheless, there are limits to the language of rights, as there are limits to any language we use to describe the world and our relations within it. Rights will always be an imperfect and clumsy articulation of our lived relationships of care, and RoN will feel like an unnecessary and formal imposition on those who already exist in healthy relationships with natural entities (§4). In an ideal world, we might not need the language of rights, and we would all recognize and be naturally motivated to live up to our responsibilities to each other and to the natural world. But we do not live in such a world, and for the foreseeable future the public and enforceable language of rights will be required, despite its limitations.[66]

2014, p. 286). I hope an understanding of the limitations of rights-language can help avoid this. Rights are blunt tools, helpful in public forums, and should not be seen as replacements for the particularities of relationships, responsibilities, and cosmologies of indigenous peoples. However, I have not said anything in this chapter about the political realities of those forums and systems within which rights are expressed. If rights-based language is only articulated and interpreted within state systems which are animated by colonial and extractive agendas, there is little reason for indigenous peoples to try and articulate themselves in that language.

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