



<https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.01.08>

Research article

A Philosophical Interpretation of Nature's Intrinsic Value

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Abstract

Grounded in the Marxist theory of value and Xi Jinping's thought on ecological civilisation, this paper systematically explores the core question of whether nature possesses intrinsic value. The article first critiques the theoretical limitations of the traditional instrumentalist theory of value and uni-dimensional ecocentrism, pointing out that under the subject-object relational model of value, maintaining human subjectivity does not necessarily deny nature's intrinsic value. By introducing a relational expression of value, the paper demonstrates the equal status of nature as an object within the value relationship, revealing the logical possibility of nature's intrinsic value. Secondly, integrating the labor theory of value with the theory of innovative labor, the paper analyses the roles of land, machinery, and high-tech production in value creation. It points out that nature's creativity and human creativity possess an inherent unity, and that the latent intrinsic value of nature is actualised through human practical activities, transforming into an 'endogenous use value.' On this basis, the article explores the unity of 'is' and 'ought' from an ontological perspective, elucidating how the creativity of ecosystems intrinsically connects factual judgements with value judgements. Ultimately, centred on the scientific proposition that "lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver," it demonstrates the dialectical unity of ecological and economic values and proposes a philosophical foundation for building a 'community of life' between humanity and nature, thereby achieving a dialectical transcendence of both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism.

Keywords: Nature, Intrinsic Value, Lucid Waters and Lush Mountains Are as Valuable as Mountains of Gold and Silver, Community of Life

Acknowledgment

This paper is a phased outcome of the "Hermeneutical Study of Technology" project (x2sxN2200060) under the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee's Cultural Experts and "Four Batches" Talents Programme; and the "Hermeneutical Study on the Reliability of Artificial Intelligence" project (23YJC720020) under the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Programme of the Ministry of Education.

Citation: Ye, L., & Wu, G. (2026). A Philosophical Interpretation of Nature's Intrinsic Value. *Technology and Language*, 7(1), 121-139. <https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.01.08>



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УДК 316.4

<https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.01.08>

Научная статья

Философская интерпретация внутренней ценности природы

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Аннотация

В этой статье, основанной на марксистской теории ценностей и взглядах Си Цзиньпина на экологическую цивилизацию, систематически исследуется ключевой вопрос о том, обладает ли природа внутренней ценностью. Сначала в статье критикуются теоретические ограничения традиционной инструменталистской теории ценностей и одномерного эгоцентризма, подчеркивается, что в рамках субъект-объектной модели ценностей сохранение человеческой субъективности не обязательно отрицает внутреннюю ценность природы. Представляя относительное выражение ценности, статья демонстрирует равный статус природы как объекта в рамках ценностных отношений, раскрывая логическую возможность внутренней ценности природы. Во-вторых, объединяя трудовую теорию стоимости с теорией инновационного труда, в статье анализируется роль земли, машин и высокотехнологичного производства в создании стоимости. Это указывает на то, что креативность природы и креативность человека обладают неотъемлемым единством и что скрытая внутренняя ценность природы реализуется в практической деятельности человека, превращаясь в "эндогенную потребительскую ценность". Исходя из этого, в статье исследуется единство понятий "есть" и "должно" с онтологической точки зрения, выясняется, как креативность экосистем неразрывно связывает фактические суждения с оценочными суждениями. В конечном счете, основанный на научном утверждении о том, что "прозрачные воды и пышные горы так же ценны, как горы из золота и серебра", он демонстрирует диалектическое единство экологических и экономических ценностей и предлагает философскую основу для построения "сообщества жизни" между человечеством и природой, тем самым достигая диалектической трансцендентности обоих антропоцентризм и эгоцентризм.

Ключевые слова: Природа, Внутренняя ценность, Прозрачные воды и пышные горы так же ценны, как горы из золота и серебра, Сообщество жизни

Благодарность: Документ является результатом проекта "Герменевтическое изучение технологий" (x2sxN2200060), осуществляемого Отделом пропаганды Отдела культурных экспертов Центрального комитета КПК и программой "Четыре партии талантов", а также проекта "Герменевтическое исследование надежности искусственного интеллекта" (23YJC720020) в рамках исследовательской программы гуманитарных и социальных наук Министерства образования.

Для цитирования: Ye, L., & Wu, G. (2026). A Philosophical Interpretation of Nature's Intrinsic Value // *Technology and Language*. 2026. № 7(1). P. 121-139. <https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.01.08>



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INTRODUCTION

In the historical process of comprehensively advancing the Chinese path to modernisation, how to achieve the dialectical unity of economic development and ecological preservation has emerged as a paramount contemporary issue. President Xi Jinping's philosophical assertion that "lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver" profoundly elucidates the intrinsic correlation between ecological and economic values, providing fundamental guidance for building an ecological civilisation in the new era. This proposition is not merely an innovation in developmental concepts; it harbours deep philosophical implications regarding value – namely, whether nature possesses intrinsic value, and how such value is manifested and realised through human practical activities. Confronted with the global ecological crisis and the limitations of traditional value systems, it is imperative to systematically reflect upon and theoretically reconstruct nature's intrinsic value from a philosophical perspective. Anchored in the Marxist framework of value theory and the practical logic of the Chinese path to modernisation, this paper demonstrates the generative mechanisms, ontological foundations, and practical significance of nature's intrinsic value, aiming to provide robust theoretical support for the construction of a community of life between humanity and nature.

THE DEFICIENCIES OF TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL VALUE THEORIES AND THEIR THEORETICAL TRANSCENDENCE

Through the lens of traditional value theory, nature does not qualify as a subject, and is deemed devoid of value; any attributed value must correlate with humankind. Natural conditions and resources are reduced to mere survival necessities for humans that are available for exploitation. In this view, nature is devoid of intrinsic value. The sole bearers of value are humans, as only they are considered to possess value and rights. The valuation of other entities is determined by human beings, governed by their utilitarian motives and objectives, thereby transforming nature into a tool or means for humans to fulfill their personal goals. This perspective epitomizes the instrumentalist viewpoint on value.

To counter this instrumentalist perspective, the value of ecocentrism has gained significant traction. Intrinsic value theory in ecocentrism acknowledges nature's inherent value and inalienable rights. Humans as well as non-human entities, inclusive of biological lifeforms, should be valued. Intrinsic value theory propagates the extension of 'natural rights' from humans to nature, implying nature's entitlement to rights. This theory broadens the scope of traditional value concepts, such as morality, justice, equality, responsibility, and obligation, from human-human interactions to human-nature relationships. It, therefore, relatively confers subjectivity upon biological entities in nature. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the value of ecocentrism is not without its issues.

The Chinese theory of value is predominantly grounded in a subject–object relational paradigm. In this framework, subjectivity remains exclusive to humans, and only elements



bearing utility or significance to humans are valued. As articulated by Deshun Li (1987), “Without a doubt, the subject, in any sense, can only be broadly construed as humans (encompassing various forms of human social aggregates), not as deities, ‘objective spirits,’ other life forms, or objects. This is because humans are the sole practitioners and cognizers” (p. 59). Lianke Li (1991) asserts that “The subject's emergence as a subject is attributed to its inherent capacity and vitality for cognition and action” (p. 74). In the *Encyclopedia of China (Philosophy I)*, the universal essence of value is characterized as “a relationship between actual humans and the attributes of an object that caters to a certain human need” (*Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 2004, p. 345*). In a nutshell, value represents a particular effect, characteristic, or purpose of an object that corresponds to or fulfills the requirements of the subject.

Instrumentalist theory of value exhibits inherent deficiencies, which the subject-object model of value is positioned to overcome, for several compelling reasons:

First, the notion of natural instrumental value, which emerges from the perspective of human utility, is contested. Nonetheless, the consensus remains that humans are the subjects, and only humans (or their various collectives) can serve as subjects. Nature cannot act as a subject in this model. The subject-object dichotomy forms a dual category in human cognitive and practical activities. The subject is the initiator and bearer of these activities, while the object is the target of the subject's knowledge and action. The subject possesses intentionality, agency, and purposefulness, features that nature inherently lacks.

Second, the anthropocentric instrumentalist view of value, rather than the subject-object relational model of value, is opposed. Stemming from the premise that humans are subjects, the resultant value paradigm is the subject-object relational model. In this model, humans function as value subjects, necessitating a value relationship between humans and the object, rather than a natural or cognitive relationship. If the object is devoid of value attributes, a value relationship cannot be established. A relationship without relatives is non-existent, and it cannot consist of a single “relative”, such as the human. Recognizing the subject-object relational model of value also requires acknowledging that the object possesses or potentially harbors valuable properties. Without this, the relationship between the subject and object remains purely natural, signifying a factual relationship rather than a value relationship.

Third, the instrumentalist view of value, which defines value as the object satisfying the needs of the subject, is imprecise. The needs of the subject can be both positive and negative, without offering a clear, positive delineation of ‘needs.’ In this definition of value, the object is entirely passive, devoid of any agency. In truth, the object and subject are mutually constitutive. A plethora of relationships exist between the subject and object, both positive (such as harmonious coexistence between humans and nature) and negative (preferring mountains of gold and silver to lucid waters and lush mountains). Therefore, the question arises: under what conditions does a subject-object needs relationship become a value relationship? As articulated by Xi Jinping in the report of the 19th National Congress



of the CPC, “Socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era; the principal contradiction facing Chinese society is the discrepancy between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life” (Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2017, p. 11). The ‘needs for a better life’ encompass a positive definition of the value demand for ‘better.’

Consistent with the subject-object relational model of value, the assertion ‘P holds value’ suggests that P fulfills the requirements of subject S, thereby casting P as an object. ‘P holds value’ indicates that P, acting as an object, meets the needs of subject S. From a human perspective, intrinsic value implies that humans, as objects, satisfy the demands of the subject, which is human as well. This analysis is valid, for example, when a person scratches an itch; the individual becomes both the agent and the recipient, thereby demonstrating an inherent human value.

In this frame of reference, the primary arguments against the intrinsic value of nature include: first, only humans serve as subjects and possess objectives; second, a fundamental disparity exists between humans and nature. Only humans exhibit consciousness, initiative, and creativity, and only they can comprehend and alter the world.

One might say, the statement ‘P holds value’ fundamentally signifies a value relationship between object P and subject S, a relationship between the relating and the related party. Solely from a value relationship perspective, object P is defined by subject S, and their mutual value relationship. Conversely, subject S is similarly defined by object P, and their shared value relationship. This can be represented as $PvrS$, or $SvrP$.¹ According to this relational expression, object P and subject S share equivalent value, going beyond a simple instrumental natural relationship. There is no hard and fast rule that P should be the subject; it merely needs to possess, or potentially hold, valuable characteristics. Therefore, while the notion of nature as a subject can be dismissed, it does not deny the intrinsic value of nature.

Fourth, the subject-object relational model of value encompasses a dialectic unity. The extent of value is always subject to the physical existence of the subject-object pair, and the subject's comprehension limitations regarding the object's intrinsic value. The reason the subject acts as such lies in its role as the initiator and bearer of cognitive and practical activities, with the object becoming the aim of the subject's cognition and action. Dialectical materialism asserts that materials shape consciousness, which consequently mirrors the materials. In this scenario, materiality takes precedence, with consciousness being secondary. Materiality plays a determinant role on consciousness, which, however, exhibits a dynamic role on materials. Despite the dynamic nature of the subject, the value of the object relative to the subject is influenced by the subject's inherent materiality, and its understanding of the object's value. In contrast, the realization of the object's intrinsic value necessitates the involvement of the subject's practical activities and the process of cognition. Generally

¹ Here, vr stands for the abbreviation of value relationship.



speaking, the theory of value diverges from both epistemology and ontology. The value relationship between subject and object contrasts with their cognitive and natural relationships. Nonetheless, the ontological and epistemological states of the subject and the object significantly impact their value relationship. The concept of pure value is non-existent; the subject-object value relationship is inevitably shaped by their ontological and epistemological states. The subject's role is to generate a proactive, dynamic, and conscious effect within the confines dictated by the material relationship between the subject and object. Similarly, the subject-object's epistemological relationship is governed by their ontological and value-theory relationships. For example, the epistemological relationship of quantum information technology, a type of artificial natural object, is constrained by its material and value states.

Affirming humanity's subject status does not imply concurrence with the notion that humans are the overseers and commanders of life and the natural world, with nature merely succumbing to human modifications. Nature, the progenitor of life, forms ecosystems that underpin human survival and evolution. Marx and Engels precociously identified the considerable value inherent in nature, embodying an extensive ecological value philosophy. The natural world constitutes the necessary precondition and base for human survival and progress. As Marx elucidated, “Man himself is a product of nature, emerging and evolving within his environment and in concert with it” (Marx & Engels, 1995, pp. 374-375). It is not feasible for humans to surmount nature. “Insofar as nature is not the human body itself, it represents the inorganic body of man.... Man is a component of nature” (Marx & Engels, 2009, p. 161). Engels proffered a warning to humanity, “Let us not become overly engrossed in our victories over nature. For each such triumph, nature exacts its retaliation” (Marx & Engels, 2012, p. 998). Xi Jinping unequivocally stated in the report of the 19th National Congress of the CPC, “Only by adhering to nature's laws can mankind effectively avert missteps in the exploitation and utilization of nature. The damage inflicted upon nature by humans will ultimately recoil upon humanity itself, a rule that is incontrovertible” (Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2017, p. 50).

According to the perspective of the Marxist labor theory of value, nature, devoid of human labor's embodiment, lacks economic value. However, this does not discount the potential for other inherent values, suggesting the existence of untapped potential within nature (Engels, 1970, p. 209). Indeed, as Engels elucidated that “Political economists have always declared that labor is the source of all wealth. In reality, labor and nature together are the twin sources of wealth; nature furnishes the materials which labor transforms into wealth” (Marx & Engels, 2012, p. 998). Wealth represents an economic value. Therefore, it is evident that economic value emerges from the confluence of nature and labor. In the absence of nature, economic value is unattainable. Engels acknowledged the intrinsic value of nature, where ‘value’ conveys a more extensive and profound concept than labor value (economic value).



Employing socially necessary labor time as a metric to ascertain value is apt for customary labor rather than for innovative labor (such as technological innovation). The relationship between the time invested in innovative labor and socially necessary labor time is not linear. The value of innovative labor further underscores the premise that labor is the fountainhead of value (Wang, 2012), but importantly, reveals an aspect distinctly different from conventional calculations of labor wealth value. Amidst the global ecological crisis and the specific ecological challenges in our nation, it is imperative to broaden philosophical value notions and probe the deep-seated value of nature, thereby laying a theoretical groundwork for ecological value.

A NEW ARGUMENT FOR NATURE'S INHERENT VALUE

The interdependence and mutual construction between humans and nature yield a systemic and historical existence that shares a common value system. Consistent with Marx's viewpoint, humans are direct constituents of nature. Since the advent of humanity, nature has transitioned into an objective existence for humans, evolving from an abstract being independent of humans to a source of natural materials or labor resources embedded within the labor process (Marx & Engels, 2016, pp. 167-176). The term 'nature' is perceived with both broad and narrow connotations, demarcated into 'nature per se' and 'societal nature.' Ecological nature is categorized under societal nature, carrying fundamental characteristics of both natural and societal attributes (Wang, 1991). Simply put, nature represents a material world that, although distinct from human society, is intrinsically linked to humans. Therefore, nature's inherent value is inextricably connected with human social production practices and labor. Here, nature's inherent value diverges from both the instrumental value and the inherent values proposed by traditional Western anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric philosophies. Marx postulated that value is borne out of the relationship between a subject's needs and an object's ability to fulfill those needs (Marx & Engels, 1963, p. 406). Therefore, nature's inherent value originates when the subject's subjective needs, via practice and labor, act upon the object, and the object exhibits inherent attributes capable of satisfying the subject's needs. In this context, labor operates as the bridging entity between subject and object, enabling the realization of nature's inherent value (Fu, 2000). According to Xi Jinping ecology possesses value which is recognized based on the fundamental premise that "lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver" (Xi, 2021). Interpreting ecological value as economic value implies that while Xi has highlighted the dialectical unity between ecological and economic values, he has underscored the potential or intrinsic value of a robust ecological environment. Even though ecological value deviates from labor value, an inherent unity of value resonates within both.

In the realm of traditional agricultural production, the amalgamation of factors such as human labor, production tools, and land dictate the value of agricultural products. It is noteworthy that the quality of agricultural products varies significantly, based on the land used for cultivation. While certain lands yield superior agricultural products, others produce



merely average ones, and some are entirely non-arable. The diverse output of goods, each with distinctive utility and value (as determined by socially necessary labor time), that springs forth from different lands with identical human labor underscores the pivotal role of integral agricultural components – land and socially necessary labor time – in shaping the value of agricultural products. Simply put, the combined force of land and human labor bears agricultural value. On the contrary, in the manufacturing of industrial goods, there is a choice between manual and mechanized production. The advent of machine production, which enhances labor productivity, significantly replaces human labor. In the market of commodities, the utility and value of goods are jointly determined by socially necessary labor time. In this context, value creation becomes a shared responsibility of machines and humans.

Regarding crafting intricate and complex high-tech products such as integrated circuits and high-performance engines, a significant number of components demand the precision of machines or software control, exceeding the capabilities of manual labor. Evidently, the creation of such high-tech products is beyond the reach of manual labor in the absence of precision machines or software. Many of these key core technology products, as commodities with high added value (utility and value), are desired yet elusive, owing to manufacturing limitations. Without advanced machinery, the creation of these high-tech products remains an unfulfilled aspiration. Similarly, without a pool of highly skilled technological manpower, these products remain unreachable. Hence, it is the synergy of humans and machines that brings the value of high-tech products into existence. This premise forms the foundation of the ensuing discussion: in the presence of humans, machines are destined to create value.

Given the existence of humans as proposition r , the existence of machines as proposition m , and the creation of high-tech product value as proposition v , the following arguments are developed using propositional logic:

- Premises: (1) r
(2) m
(3) $r \wedge m \rightarrow v$

The proposition to be demonstrated is: $m \rightarrow v$

- Proof: (4) $r \rightarrow (m \rightarrow v)$ (3), applying the rule of exportation
(5) $m \rightarrow v$ (1), (4), applying the rule of modus ponens

Proposition (5) indicates that the existence of humans is a prerequisite for machines to create the value of high-tech products. The existence and value creation potential of machines independent of humans remain an unproven concept. For instance, Alpha Go's capability to defeat top human Go players also hinges on human creativity. Whether considering the creators of Alpha Go or its human opponents, the existence of humans is an indispensable prerequisite for machines to create value.

This analysis suggests that machines' capacity to create value is contingent on human



involvement. However, this raises a further question: in what sense can the latent productivity of land, devoid of human creativity, be deemed valuable? Holmes Rolston (1989/2000) argued that unlike individual components of nature, entities such as land or species exist as holistic elements of nature and inherently possess value (p. 73). This intrinsic value differs from labor value but is dependent on the symbiotic ecological relationship between humans and nature. In other words, the extinction of a species impacts the entirety and integrity of an ecosystem. Moreover, land represents a community rather than a nature individual (Leopold, 1949, pp. vii-ix). Xi further highlighted that “mountains, rivers, forests, fields, lakes, and grasslands” constitute a living community (Ministry of Justice of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Each of these natural elements, including their interrelationships, embodies a sense of comprehensiveness and systemic integrity.

Considering land (or wilderness) a living community, it harbors the potential for growth given the presence of primeval conditions such as abundant water, sunlight, and possibly, the seeds of vegetables or fruits. This land spontaneously yields wild crops. These crops may serve as a food source for animals or birds, be utilized by explorers for nourishment, or be harvested by traders to be sold in urban markets. Additionally, these wild crops can significantly contribute to the genetic enhancement of agricultural produce. A notable instance is the eminent scientist, Mr. Yuan Longping, who significantly propelled his hybrid rice breeding endeavors using wild rice. Hence, the innate creative and generative capabilities of the land (or wilderness) lay the groundwork and possibility for its value relationship with humans. The pressing question, however, is how the creativity of such a natural ecosystem can be converted into value as posited by the labor theory of value. While wild crops do not necessitate human intervention for their production, they acquire value once introduced into a laboratory or market setting. It is evident that the value in this context is not labor value rather a different form of value. Consequently, humans or human labor are not the exclusive metric for determining the value of nature. Nevertheless, it is fundamentally equivalent to labor value. Otherwise, how would the value of wild crops be identified and quantified?

Accordingly, we propose that wild crops carry an intrinsic value, which remains latent and not immediately apparent. As this hidden value enters the value relationship shared between nature and humans, it becomes evident, transforming the intrinsic worth into a practical value, or what may be termed an ‘endogenous use value.’ In this context, humans play a pivotal role in revealing the potential intrinsic value of nature, illustrating the symbiosis between human subjectivity and the inherent attributes of nature. The unveiling of nature's inherent value is intrinsically tied to human discovery. Why is it that humans are capable of recognizing the value of certain wild crops? It is the cognitive prowess of humans that illuminates the latent value of these wild crops. The advent of agricultural, industrial, and ecological civilizations, along with their associated value systems, are a testament to human knowledge capabilities. When humans begin to distinguish anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric values, it represents a transcendence of nature by human civilization (Lu, 2021). The prevailing global ecological crisis is attributable to a lack of adequate



comprehension and proper respect for the latent intrinsic value of the natural ecosystem. The intrinsic value of nature resonates with human subjectivity. General Secretary Xi Jinping underscored the significance of a robust ecological environment in his report at the 19th National Congress of the CPC, urging that “the ecological environment be treated with the same reverence as life” (Compilation and Translation Bureau, 2017, p. 24). When the ecological environment deteriorates to the point where even the provision of basic necessities such as air and water becomes a concern, the toll exacted on humanity will be the erosion of the inherent value that the natural ecology embodies, which will further reflect as a wealth (Green GDP) deficit that humanity must bear.

The intrinsic value of nature can be approached from a different angle. When a natural ecosystem is damaged, the human labor required to restore it to its original state holds a certain value, which essentially reflects the inherent worth of nature. Instances of ecological damage that are irreparable, or where recovery time is immeasurable, carry an immeasurable value, according to the principle that socially necessary labor time determines value. Instead of waiting for nature to succumb to harm before acting, the ideal approach is to protect nature proactively, acknowledging the latent value inherent in an ecological system. Given its boundless potential for creativity, it is essential for humans to harmoniously coexist with nature. Ultimately, the root of both nature’s intrinsic value and human labor value can be traced back to human autonomy and creativity.

Human creativity is reliant on a sound natural ecosystem. It is neither bestowed by a “divine entity,” nor emerges from “nothingness.” Its primary source is inextricably tied to nature, which inherently exhibits creativity. As Marx articulated, “Man did not create matter itself. Even the capacity of man to create a certain productive ability of matter can only be conducted under the pre-existing conditions of matter itself” (Marx & Engels, 1975, p. 46). This infers that human creativity is inherently present within matter. Matter possesses “inherent, vivid, and essential forces” (Marx & Engels, 1957, p. 163), indicating latent potentialities. Without these potentialities, human creation would be impossible. Hence, human creativity depends on these natural potentialities. The creative capacities of both humans and nature contribute to their relationship and the value relationships borne from it.

The creativity inherent in nature was already discerned by ancient Greek philosophers. Aristotle, a luminary of the time, dedicated considerable attention to the concept of ‘nature’ in his seminal work *Metaphysics*. He proposed six interpretations of ‘nature’: the growth process of living entities, seeds of such entities, the intrinsic source of motion for natural objects, raw material, the fundamental essence of natural objects, and the intrinsic essence of any given entity (Aristotle, ca. 4th century BCE/2021, pp. 99-100). Through these definitions, it becomes evident that Aristotle's concept of ‘nature’ is intimately connected with notions of growth, origin, and essence. Therefore, ‘nature’ does not merely represent natural entities or an aggregate of such entities forming the natural world. Rather, it underscores the inherent nature, origin, and growth associated with entities. Without growth, it becomes implausible to categorize an entity as natural. As Aristotle articulated, “The primary and principal



meaning of 'nature' is the intrinsic principle of motion in entities. Material is referred to as nature because it is capable of receiving such things, and generation and growth are termed nature owing to their motion originating from this. The inherent principle of motion in the existence of nature is nature itself, which is somehow innate to an entity, either potentially or actually" (Miao, 1993, p. 116). It can be further posited that the essence and origin of nature equate to growth or creation, as growth embodies creation, thereby implying that nature harbors a creative essence. Without this creative essence, how could nature have evolved to yield humankind?

The phrase 'nature,' conceptualized as a word combination, initially surfaced in the ancient Chinese text, *Tao Te Ching*, authored by Laozi. Interpretations of 'nature' have been subject to extensive discussion. Conventionally, 'nature' is perceived as a compound term wherein 'Zi' equates to 'self,' and 'Ran' translates to 'thus,' culminating in 'Zi Ran' or 'nature,' signifying "it is so of its own accord." Zhang Dainian, in *Outline of Chinese Philosophy*, posited, "Many predecessors misconstrued 'Zi Ran' as a noun, suggesting that the 'Tao' derives its principles from nature, which is a substantial misinterpretation. The term 'Zi Ran' appears repeatedly in Laozi's works... The term 'Zi Ran' consistently implies 'being so of its own accord,' not functioning as a proper noun" (Zhang, 1982, p. 18). However, in recent years, this interpretation has been contested. For instance, in the expression "Man models earth, earth models heaven, heaven models Tao, Tao models nature" (Laozi, 1972, Chapter 25, p. 8), 'Zi Ran' is treated as a noun. However, this noun does not represent the contemporary understanding of the 'natural world.' Liu Xiaogan proposed, "While 'Zi Ran' grammatically functions as a noun or an object, its semantic essence still mirrors the adjectival connotation of occurring naturally" (Liu, 2006, p. 317). And so, 'Zi Ran' can serve as an adverb, adjective, or noun. However, its core connotation, "being so of its own accord," remains unchanged. This concept emphasizes the intrinsic propelling force and causal factors of development within entities, or the notion of "occurring naturally, without the need for external intervention" (Zhang, 1998, p. 105). 'Zi Ran' underlines the internal nature of causality; even if subjected to external influences, these cannot fundamentally alter the intrinsic nature of the cause. It is clear that Laozi's ultimate category is 'Tao,' and "Tao models nature" pertains to the "normative nature of Tao" – "it is so of its own accord, it is naturally so." This bears a remarkable resemblance to the ancient Greek understanding of the self-creative nature of 'nature.' The semantics of 'Zi Ran' illuminate the shared aspects of Eastern and Western civilizations.

The relationship between humanity and nature forms an integral whole, within which the interplay between the two cannot be broadly generalized as one entity determining the other. Rather, it exists as a dialectically unified relationship, characterized by reciprocal action and mutual constraint. Marx asserted, "Nature embodies the inorganic body of man; man, much like nature, is engaged in a ceaseless cycle of interaction and dialogue with it, necessitated by the survival imperative" (Marx, 1844/2000, p. 56). While analyzing the correlation between human essence and industry, Marx revealed that industry represents the



outward, public display of human's intrinsic forces. He noted, “Industry epitomizes the real, historical interaction of nature, and thereby of natural science, with man. Therefore, if we perceive industry as the palpable manifestation of man's elemental power, we comprehend the human essence of nature or the inherent natural essence of man” (Marx, 1844/2000, p. 89). The notion of “the human essence of nature or the natural essence of man” illuminates the reciprocal interplay between humans and nature, highlighting that nature possesses anthropocentric characteristics, while humans embody naturalistic elements (Chen, 1988). Indeed, it is the inherent creativity of nature that imparts creative capabilities to humans.

LEAP IN ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION THOUGHT: BUILDING A ‘COMMUNITY OF LIFE’

Surpassing both anthropocentric and biocentric paradigms, the inherent potential value of nature is actualized under human agency, elevating the intrinsic values of both humans and nature from their initial natural entities, emerging as value carriers. Consequently, an integrated value system, where humans and nature coexist in a relationship defined by mutual indispensability, interdependence, and symbiotic harmony, can be created. This dynamic, termed as a ‘community of life’ is a cornerstone of Xi Jinping's ecological civilization thought, predicated on the principle that “lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver.”

Lucid waters and lush mountains ought to possess ecological value. Based on academic interpretations and definitions of the concept of value, value belongs to a relational category; it is the utility generated from the subject-object relationship based on the subject's cognition of the inherent properties and functions of the object (Li, 2006). The meaning of ecological value is the subject-object utility relationship between ecosystem services and human beings within the philosophical category (Yu & Yang, 2022). Clearly, the concept of ecological value differs from the value of goods, commodities, and labor in traditional economics. The concept of ecological value is established upon the nature and functions of the ecosystem – as an objective existence – and its relationship with the object it serves: the human subject. Therefore, the premise for establishing ecological value is that the ecosystem itself possesses the intrinsic potential to validate a value relationship. Leopold (1949) also pointed out: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.” Whether it is the ecosystem's intrinsic potential or its authenticity and integrity, its own intrinsic value is not the non-empirical “animism” advocated by ecocentrism. Rather, it is a transcendence of intuitive natural intrinsic value, understanding the value of ecology itself from the category of the value relationship within the community of life between humans and nature. The construction of this community of life between humans and nature requires addressing the following three key areas:

First, stemming from the root of the value of creativity, the precise implications of the scientific postulate that “lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as mountains of



gold and silver” can be profoundly comprehended. This postulate unveils that ecological and labor value serve as dual sources of value, broadening the Marxist labor value theory by integrating ecological value within its purview. Value not only originates from labor but also from creativity. Individuals should not merely engage in conventional labor, but also delve deeper into recognizing and harnessing their inherent creativity. Therefore, a shift from human labor to creative labor is facilitated. This shift accentuates not only the value produced by labor but also the value generated by creative labor. Such a transition will contribute to a reevaluation of the significance and value of labor, gradually shifting from labor-intensive to creativity-intensive techniques. This is consistent with the demands of ecological conservation and the pursuit of ecological value. Simultaneously, recognizing the value of creative labor can stimulate the enthusiasm of scientists and technicians, providing a potent catalyst for rapidly mastering and developing core technologies, thereby expediting the country's advancement into the first tier of global science and technology.

The inherent value of lucid waters and lush mountains is engendered by the ecosystem. As long as these natural features persist, the potential for ecological value remains boundless. Conversely, the economic value created by labor, symbolized by mountains of gold and silver, faces potential depreciation if the products produced cannot immediately satisfy exchange value, and their creativity continually diminishes in competitive markets. This suggests that the ecological value signified by lucid waters and lush mountains continually expands, whereas the economic value symbolized by mountains of gold and silver is always at a depreciation risk. Consequently, product innovation holds a definitive value advantage in a competitive market. Likewise, if the creativity of lucid waters and lush mountains is disrupted, transitioning from an ecosystem to an inorganic system, they lose their creativity or potentiality. The intrinsic value of lucid waters and lush mountains dissipates, eroding the practical support for the proposition “lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver.” Protecting the sustainable creativity of the ecosystem necessitates the preservation of the basic ecological conditions – lucid waters and lush mountains. Protecting the ecosystem requires not only a shift in traditional values but also the enforcement of rigorous regulations. In this respect, Xi Jinping has highlighted that “only the strictest systems and the strictest rule of law can provide reliable safeguards for constructing an ecological civilization, and the concept of ecological red lines must be firmly established” (People’s Daily Online, 2013).

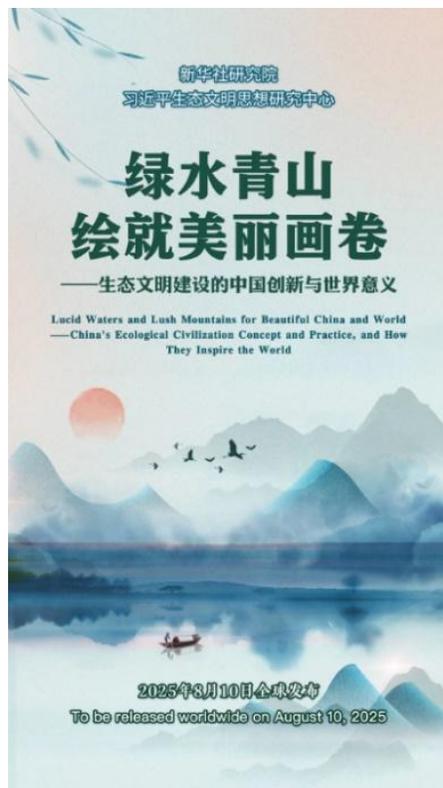


Figure 1. An environmental public service video released worldwide in 2025 by the Research Center for Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization, Xinhua Institute.

Second, derived from the scientific proposition that “lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver,” the construction of a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, termed as a ‘community of life,’ becomes essential. To elevate the understanding and appreciation of the ecosystem's value, where humans and nature cohabitate, Xi Jinping introduced the concept of building a community of life. It states that “The interconnected life threads of humans, fields, waters, mountains, soil, and trees form a community of life” (Communist Party of China Central Committee, 2013, p. 83). This concept underscores that “The human-nature relationship is a community of life that necessitates respect, adherence, and protection of nature” (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 24). Here, nature's inherent value, under the aegis of human activity, paves the way for respect and protection, thereby conferring upon it a moral standing. The community of life concept, championed by Xi Jinping, is an essential theoretical innovation in Marxist (ecological) civilization thought, transcending the conventional dichotomy of anthropocentrism and biocentrism. Its essence lies in establishing an ecological civilization ethos rooted in the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. By employing a dialectical materialism epistemology, a dialectical unity relationship between humans and nature gets



articulated, surpassing the traditional binary of opposition between humans and nature.

Third, to establish a community of life between humans and nature, it is imperative to comprehensively examine ontology. It is only through the ontological exploration of humans and nature that a philosophical foundation can be laid down for their mutual value relationship. The assertion that “lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver” implies a fusion of the ‘is’ and the ‘ought.’ From the perspective of statement’s nature, “lucid waters and lush mountains” encapsulate an ‘ought’ declaration, while “mountains of gold and silver” articulate an ‘is’ declaration. A known conundrum in moral philosophy or ethics is the logical chasm between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ statements, making it impossible to bridge the two through logical reasoning. However, to actualize the concept that “lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver” and to construct a ‘community of life,’ it becomes crucial to navigate beyond the logical chasm between ‘is’ and ‘ought.’

One might say, the creativity intrinsic to ecosystems could potentially provide a logical solution to this vast chasm. The creative capacity of an ecosystem allows it to engender value, thereby embodying the ‘ought,’ signifying a form of value existence. Concurrently, the ecosystem as a factual existence represents the ‘is.’ Hence, any depiction of the ecosystem inevitably embodies a unified existence of ‘is’ and ‘ought.’

Examining the term ‘on’ in ontology, which translates to ‘is’ or ‘existence,’ it is apparent that ‘is’ inherently possesses a creative attribute, a capability to ‘be.’ As elucidated by distinguished philosophers like Zisong Wang², the term ‘is’ encapsulates three dimensions. First, it refers to existence as a particular entity (‘existence’ being a connotation of ‘is’). Second, it designates functioning via inherent capabilities, and third, it captures manifesting or presenting in a specific manner (Song, 2011, p. 13). And so, ‘is’ holds an enabling capacity, which allows the ‘being’ to arise or become apparent. Every ‘being’ in the world emerges owing to the arising capability of ‘is,’ including the human ‘being.’ The connection between ‘is’ – as an enabling force for the ‘being’ to arise – and value underscores that ‘is’ incorporates value. Humans, being creative entities, could neither be born, exist, evolve, nor realize creativity and value without ‘is.’ Therefore, the relationship between this inherent ‘existence’ (‘is’) and the unification of ‘is’ and ‘ought’ is inferred as a basic implication of ‘is’.

Through the analytical lens of animal and plant biogeography and material cycles’ stability and dynamics, the eco-ethicist Holmes Rolston (1989/2000, pp. 19-20) proposes an intriguing notion, “The ‘ought’ is not so much derived from the ‘is’ as it is discovered in the process of describing the ‘is’ ... For some observers, the stark bifurcation between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ has dissolved; it seems that with an adequate grasp of the facts, value emerges, both becoming inherent properties of the system.” This suggests that during the evolution of ecosystems, ‘is’ and ‘ought’ maintain an inherent logical unity and are not categorically dissociated.

² Zisong Wang (1921–2018) was a renowned historian of Western philosophy in China and a founding figure in the study of ancient Greek philosophy.



The concept of ecological civilization stands as a crucial research theme within the realm of contemporary eco-ethics, and the progression of ecological ethics invariably calls for a transformation in values pertaining to the ecological environment. Xi Jinping has underscored the imperative to cultivate the mainstream values of ecological civilization (Xinhuanet, 2015). Eco-ethics or environmental ethics delves into the intricacies of human relationships with the ecological environment, probing ethical norms and guidelines that govern the dynamic between humans and nature. It further reflects on moral relationships among humans through the lens of their interaction with nature. The exchange of matter, energy, and information between humans and nature inevitably impacts human relationships and ecological values, resulting in changes in the natural ecological environment, and consequently, modifications in societal and human evolution (including future generations). Therefore, humans, as beings endowed with rational capacities, should engage in moral introspection regarding the ecological environment and assume ethical responsibility. This conscious ecological ‘moral mandate’ should serve as a self-regulation of practical human reasoning. Respect for the value of nature equates to respect for the value of humans; to respect nature is to respect humanity. This realization harmonizes ‘is’ and ‘ought,’ facilitating the mutual transformation and unity of ‘lucid waters and lush mountains’ with ‘mountains of gold and silver,’ thereby giving rise to a ‘community of life.’ This foundation paves the way for the emergence of a ‘community of shared human destiny’ that not only represents the long-term interests of the Chinese people, but also aligns with the collective interests of global humanity.

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Статья поступила 11 января 2026
одобрена после рецензирования 11 марта 2026
принята к публикации 23 марта 2026

Received: 11 January 2026
Revised: 11 March 2026
Accepted: 23 March 2026