

Ethics and the Earth: The Use and Limits of Moral Philosophy for Environmental Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the foundations of contemporary environmental ethics vis-à-vis classic paradigms of modern moral philosophy by contrasting in particular the “ocular-phenomenological” and the “rational-discursive” modes—the former emerging from the work of Schopenhauer, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, the latter by way of Kant, John Rawls, and Jürgen Habermas. This essay argues that, while the rational-communicative approach seems best fitted for success within the broader field of social ethics, it is in fact the phenomenological viewpoint which is ultimately more sympathetic with the modern environmental movement, and which is also coincident with religious ethics of attention and compassion, particularly those of East Asian traditions. If environmental issues are to be taken seriously, the framework of conventional moral theory (which tends towards the Kantian sort) needs to be expanded to admit the non-human, relinquishing the latent language of instrumentality and control that has characterized Western thought as a whole.

*Nature! We are surrounded and embraced by her;
powerless to separate ourselves from her,
and powerless to penetrate beyond her....
She is always thought and always thinks;
though not as a man, but as Nature...
She has divided herself so that she may be her own delight.*
— Goethe

The environment has in recent decades become an integral concern for social, economic, and political theory.¹ However, the integration of nature into social ethics and moral philosophy has been complicated, not least because these disciplines have become highly explosive and disunified fields. On face of it, the intrusion of this “third actor” (i.e., besides the individual and others/society) seems to enjoin nothing short of a re-conceptualization of the basic assumptions regarding ethical and moral behavior, in order to allow a basis for human-nonhuman relations. Yet even this proposal is controversial, due to the inherent differences between what we call “nature” and the socio-cultural and linguistic realm of human existence. As we move away from what has been called the Baconian “use theory” of knowledge—based on instrumental reason, and generally disastrous in its environmental legacy—there does not appear to be a simple, unified conceptual paradigm on which to ground an ethics that encompasses the human and the nonhuman.

This paper presents an interdisciplinary analysis of several alternatives upon which an ecological ethics could be grounded, focusing upon the possibilities and limits of several of the most significant extant moral paradigms to emerge out of the Kantian legacy. The analysis will deal largely with a distinction between those paradigms that can be grouped loosely under the rubric of (rational) duty and those that fall under the category of (intuitive) empathy. Whereas the former indicates a set of moral postulates based upon theories of rights and justice, the latter points rather to the use of intuition, emotion, and perception in making moral decisions. With regard to the second category, which has been on the ascendant for a number of decades, a further division can be made, and it is the distinction between what I shall call *ocular* and *discursive* ethics that will be of primacy to this essay.

“Moral Roots”: Inner and Outer Experience

[Contemporary moral philosophy] has given such a narrow focus to morality that some of the crucial connections to be made are incomprehensible in its terms.

— Charles Taylor

In a talk on gender and identity in the social sphere, Carol Gilligan once made the observation that speaking of socio-political change without corresponding psychological change is merely “whistling in the dark.”² In similar fashion, Arthur Koestler in *Kaleidoscope* argues for a synthesis of what he calls the “revolutionary” and the “saint,” archetypal personifications of the too often dichotomized action/contemplation distinction. According to Koestler, politics needs to recover its own deeper roots and moral connections “in order to ensure that the exercise of power always remains firmly anchored in the soil of wisdom and compassion” (12). This need for roots (literally, a need to “radicalize”) is especially relevant in our day, when the cold hard facts of global warming can no longer be ignored. Although large-scale transformation is of course the goal, most have come to the realization that extreme tactics on the part of single persons or small fringe groups are generally fruitless (or damaging in provoking hostility—witness the general public contempt for “ecoterrorism”). When it comes to dealing with nature (as with politics), change must begin at the “local” level of daily existence. As such, both “inner” and “outer” experience must be taken into account. John-Francis Phipps enjoins a renewal of a worldview seemingly indebted to William Blake and the English Romantics: “we should both apprehend the world mystically and try to save it by political activism of a new kind” (x). Neither of these commitments can be successful without the other.

As Wolfgang von den Daele argues in an essay entitled “Concepts of Nature in Modern Societies and Nature as a Theme in Sociology,” nature exists in our understanding as much—of not more so—than it exists “out there”—“what Nature is, is determined by images, ideas, concepts, and models” (526). Thus, it is not only a matter of saving trees or cutting down on greenhouse gas emissions, but rather of somehow transforming the entire semantic and interpretive repertoire of our culture. Phipps deliberately employs the loaded term “mysticism” in order to criticize the instrumental and calculative rationality of modernity, and to expose the need for a more integrated and holistic perception of the world: “a visionary form of politics more firmly rooted in

morality and a spirituality more connected with social reality” (1).

In similar fashion, but with rather different vocabulary, Charles Taylor has argued strongly against the dominant forms of contemporary moral thought, which, he says, tends to focus solely upon what it is “right to *do*,” rather than on what it is “good to *be*” (3). This is not to suggest, of course, that human action can or should be denied, but rather that the overwhelming priority placed upon such leaves very little conceptual space for a notion of the good “as an object of allegiance.” Like Phipps with his plea for “mysticism,” Taylor treads dangerous philosophical waters here, for it he lays himself open to accusations of idealism, irrationality, obscurantism, and perhaps even (heaven forbid), a debt to religion. Despite such risks, however, other moral thinkers have joined Taylor in making similar arguments, including Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1984), and, more recently, Werner Marx in his *Towards a Phenomenological Ethics* (1992), in which Marx posits the main task of a contemporary philosophical ethics to be a concern with quality of *character* rather than the following of *rules*. Taylor also endorses a view held by the novelist and essayist Iris Murdoch, who takes from Plato the image of the Good as the sun, i.e., the light by which humans can “see” things clearly and with a kind of dispassionate love, and that helps to define the direction of our “attention,” by which we become good. Though not a Christian, Murdoch considers the claim that science and philosophy may be enlivened by a specifically *religious* exposition of the nature of reality. Echoing Tolstoy in this regard, she argues that much of modern philosophy “separate[s] the moral agent from all that surround[s] him, and... ignore[s] the personality and the huge and daunting power of its secret, fragmentary, opaque and obsessive inner life” (Conradi 13). In short, ignorance of contingency equals ignorance of mystery, to the discredit and ensuing poverty of moral theory. Before further developing the “enlightened mysticism” propounded by these various thinkers, let us turn to a short but necessary excursus into the foundations of contemporary ethics and moral philosophy.

Kant and Formalist Ethics

[M]an must proceed as if everything depended upon him; only on this condition dare he hope that higher wisdom will grant the completion of his well intentioned endeavours.

— Immanuel Kant

As is well known, Kant wanted to establish a basis for morality without (the presence of) God—one “within the limits of reason alone.” Reason was to be the basis for ethical behavior, and the Kantian project is one of “distinguishing the types of practical reasoning and the corresponding types of ‘ought’ proper to questions about what is practically expedient, ethically prudent, and morally right” (McCarthy vii). Kant focuses not upon ethical matters *per se*, but upon questions of “justice” and “rights”—these being for him the proper domain for moral theory. Uncompromisingly rationalistic, Kantian ethical theory shuns feelings and emotions, working under the assumption, like many of his ancient Greek forbears, that the instincts invariably mislead. To be sure, Kant dedicated a large part of his third *Critique (of Judgment)* to aesthetics and visual experience, but remained adamant about separating such from the domain of reason and morality. Though he did cautiously accept art as a “symbol” of morality, it is in no way a great moral liberator: in the end Kant (like Plato) wants to keep morality safe from the taint of

aesthetic feeling. The Kantian self—free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible—has lately come under much scrutiny (Murdoch: “one may doubt whether the idea of the proud, naked will directed toward right action is a realistic and sufficient formula [in our day]” [*Sovereignty* 80]), yet the Kantian legacy in the domain of moral theory remains influential, passing through existentialism into most significant Anglo-American ethical doctrines and rights-theories of today. In the Kantian tradition, respect for an individual’s integrity and dignity is connected with the freedom of moral subjects to act upon norms verified by their own insight. As well, concern for the common good is linked to the impartiality of laws that can be accepted by all on that basis.

Formalist ethical theories can be seen as a derivative of the Kantian tradition. G. H. Mead, for example, recommends a role-taking procedure, whereby any morally judging subject puts him or herself into the position of all who would be affected by the imposition of the norm in question. More recently, John Rawls, in his important and controversial *A Theory of Justice* (1971), which shares Kant’s intention of analyzing the conditions for making impartial judgments of practical questions (in, of course, a rational manner), posited an original position of “veiled ignorance” from which one can put oneself in the position of the other regardless of their sex, age, class, social position, and so forth. The rational-contractual ethics of the post-Kantian tradition has been attacked on various points, particularly by those who lament its rejection of intuition, the emotions, and “embodied experience.” It is to these reactions to, and revisions of, the Kantian heritage that we will now turn.

Empathy and Compassion

My ethics... possesses foundation, aim and goal: first and foremost, it demonstrates theoretically the metaphysical foundations of justice and charity, and then indicates the goal to which these, if practised in perfection, must ultimately lead. At the same time it candidly confesses the reprehensible nature of the world and points to the denial of the will as the road to redemption from it.

— Arthur Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer, though heavily influenced by Kant, reacted against the primacy of reason in human existence. With regard to ethics, Schopenhauer demands that our morality should be fed by our *entire* experience, and particularly by our conscious awareness of the world about us. For him, the Will is the dominant force of human life, and it is such that makes for a (largely) self-assertive and egoistic humanity. An unqualified pessimist,³ Schopenhauer sees the human scene as a place of “restless desire and ruthless egoistic striving, devoid of freedom [and] ruled by the overwhelming determinism of the Will” (Murdoch *Metaphysics* 59). The only possible mitigations of this misery lie in two general postulates: the denial of the ego, which entails the overcoming of the divide between subject and object; or, what seems to be a much less difficult, but hardly more attractive solution—suicide. Of the first possibility, which is reflective of Asian Buddhist and Jain traditions, what is most important in the denial of the assertive ego is the instinct of compassion. All virtues (e.g., justice, duty), Schopenhauer argues, have their root not in reason but in natural compassion, which is “(in) itself an undeniable fact of human consciousness, is essential to it, and does not depend on presuppositions, concepts, religions, dogmas, myths,

training (or) education” (*Metaphysics* 60). Compassion, as a curious but nevertheless fundamental matter of human instinct, must be the ground upon which any ethics is based: instinctual sympathetic identification with others allows us some respite from the ego-driven Will, however small.

Schopenhauer briefly discusses another related form of will-denial—contemplation. This aspect of his thought proved, however, to be his biggest stumbling block, and part of the reason his ideas lead inevitably to despair. What is required is nothing less than a complete transformation of our mind and nature, which, considering the omnipotence of the Will, is by implication next to (if not entirely) impossible. Albert Schweitzer: “Man can deny [his will to live]. But if he wants to change his will to live into the will not to live he creates a contradiction within himself. He builds his philosophy of life on a false premise, something that cannot be realized” (156).⁴ As Murdoch puts it, “we are cheered by Schopenhauer to learn [that] we are endowed with instincts of compassion, but dashed to learn that we cannot change our imprinted character” (*Metaphysics* 73).

If there is any hope to be gleaned from Schopenhauer (besides suicide—the snuffing of our earthly presence to escape the “ravenous energy of egoism”), it is offered by his (sparing) remarks on the possibility of liberation through art—a more direct and plausible form of attention. It is this aspect, resurrected by Schopenhauer from the Kantian separation of art and morality, which has been influential to many post-Schopenhauerian moral thinkers, as we shall see.

Attention

Morality depends on the slow attenuation of the ego, which itself requires a quiet environment.

— Simone Weil

Schopenhauer argues that through art—more specifically, the contemplation of the beautiful—although one may not achieve the total liberation of “nirvana” (i.e., complete ego-annihilation), it is possible to quiet the Will within us. Picking up the notion of “disinterested” aesthetic contemplation from Kant, Schopenhauer translates this into a disengagement from the pressure of Will, a gradual lessening of the power of the ego. For, “it is quite obvious that the beautiful as such excites pleasure in us without having any kind of connection with our personal aims, that is to say our Will” (155). Thus, in the beautiful we perceive the “primary forms of animate and inanimate nature,” and this perception stimulates the existence of its correlative—“the will-less subject of knowledge... a pure intelligence without aims or intentions.”

Simone Weil (1909-1943), modern French mystic and political activist, cautioned in her writings against sudden and violent ego-destruction, which would entail “complete or demonic demoralization,” and perhaps lead to Schopenhauer’s least pleasing alternative. Recognizing not only the contradictoriness and absurdity of human life (like Schopenhauer) but also the limits of pessimism, Weil emphasized contemplation and pure intuition, through which both desire for and need for reward is extinguished. “Only the energy which is not due to any incentive is good” (*Gravity* 88). Iris Murdoch, influenced by both Weil and the moral philosopher G. E. Moore, also uses aesthetic imagery of vision to conceptualize the Good. As opposed to those for whom the good is a movable “tool” for the use of “rational men,” Murdoch conceives of the Good as a transcendent magnetic center, a possible object of contemplation or attention.

“Thought cannot be thought,” she argues, “unless it is directed toward a conclusion, whether in action or in judgement” (*Sovereignty* 2). Espousing the necessity of “outward vision” (as opposed to self-knowledge/“inner vision”), Murdoch says, “so long as the gaze is directed upon the ideal the exact formulation [of ethical behavior] will be a matter of history and tactics in a sense which is not rigidly determined by religious dogma” (31). Similarly: “Where virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and grow by looking.” Thus, we see the primacy of *attention* for Murdoch, a trope she employs, like Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. A show of attention is “the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent” (34). “Seeing” is used by this paradigm in a broad moral sense, with the implication that clear vision comes as a result of moral imagination and moral effort (which is an “effortless effort”). According to Murdoch, this conception adds continuity to moral life, which must no longer be seen as something that can be switched on or off as circumstances permit. Moral discipline is a constant process, and the self (“the place where we live”) a place of illusion; goodness is the attempt to “see and respond to the world in the light of a virtuous consciousness” (93). In similar fashion, freedom “is not an inconsequential chucking of one’s weight about,” but becomes the disciplined overcoming of (the egoistic) self (95).

Rejecting the Kantian division of art and morality, Murdoch claims that they are rather two aspects of the same human struggle. Art, she says, must no longer be conceived as a mere by-product of our failure to be perfectly rational, but rather as intrinsically connected with morality and goodness in its selfless attention to the things of the world. It is a psychological fact that “we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art... the idea of goodness itself” (*Sovereignty* 56). Above all, the aim of moral attention is to allow one to get beyond the “tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what there is outside one.” The connection between art and morality is more than simple analogy (which is allowed by Kant): in both (as well as in their mutual reinforcement) we cease to *be* in order to attend to the existence of something else, something exterior, “a natural object, a person in need.” In sum, the appreciation of beauty in art and nature is “a completely adequate entry *into* (and not just an analogy *of*) the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interests of *seeing* the real” (64). This exercise of detachment—which must not, Murdoch insists, devolve into some kind of consolation or “vague Shelleyan mysticism”—is difficult, but possible and extremely valuable for human moral existence.

Murdoch seeks to correct Schopenhauer (and Kant) with Plato: the Good, not the Will (or Reason or History) is transcendent. In her happy scenario, Will, “the natural energy of the psyche” that can be used to worthy purpose, bows to the Good, the “focus of attention when an intent to be virtuous co-exists with some unclarity of vision” (*Sovereignty* 69). At the same time, the inspiration of (intuitive) compassion (or, elsewhere, in her writings, “love”) counteracts, with the help of clear vision, any assertion of the now shrunken Will. With Taylor, Murdoch laments the modern obsession with action in moral theory—in which freedom is readily corrupted into self-assertion and right action into some sort of “*ad hoc* utilitarianism.”

Thus, whereas Schopenhauerian ego-annihilation invokes Buddhism and Jainism, Weilean-Murdochian attention brings

to mind the Chinese Daoist injunction upon contemplation without conscious concentration, as well as the self-forgetful pleasure found in effortless effort, action without action (Ch. *wu-wei*), and “purposiveness without purpose.” We live however (for better or worse), in a discursive (i.e., human) world, and this “ocular” paradigm neglects to take into account the communicative aspect of human social existence. In the attempt to fill the small space left for freedom by Schopenhauer, the idea of quasi-aesthetic empathetic attention invokes a Romantic expressivist harmony between an aesthetically realized (i.e., beautiful) and a moral life. What is left out is our actual living-in-the-world, with other communicative beings—the entire web or “prison house” of language. “To wish to escape solitude is cowardice,” declaims Weil; friendship must never be *sought*, only *experienced*. The ideal in this regard is to treat people as spectacles, as objects—“to live in the midst of men as in a crowded railway carriage” (*Gravity* 142). As a “general metaphysical background to morals” (Murdoch), this paradigm lacks a theory of human relationship on more than a aesthetic or visual level. Although Murdoch does speak of the importance of getting beyond treating people as things, is that not what an ocular ethos implies? In the absence of language and communication, how can the differences (or commonalities) of others be seen? Even “love,” the poets would no doubt agree, without verbal communication is a chimera. As if in recognition of this gaping lacuna, Weil hints at the advantage that discursive reason—the “understanding of relationships”—can give to the attempt to break down “idolatries.”

Communication

[The] conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral behaviour around the understanding of responsibility and relationships just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral behaviour to the understanding of rights and rules.

— Carol Gilligan

In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), Murdoch invokes the importance of psychology, arguing that this field might prompt contemporary thinkers to re-examine their discarded concepts of experience and consciousness. In the 1980s, responding to the call of feminist writers like Carol Gilligan, such a re-examination was begun, and many of the traditional assumptions of moral and psychological theory were found wanting. “The failure of women to fit existing models of human growth,” says Gilligan in *A Different Voice*, “may point to a problem in the representation, a limitation in the conception of the human condition—an omission of certain truths about life” (2). The “different voice” of which she speaks, though its development can be traced through female experience, is more importantly an alternative perspective that is brought to bear upon the problem of selfhood and the basis of human relationships.⁵ Essentially, this new perspective shows that it is conflicting *responsibilities* rather than competing *rights* that are at the center of most moral issues, thus requiring a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative (rather than formal and abstract), for the resolution of moral problems. Reacting not only against the moral assumptions of Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg, but also against the justice theory of Rawls,⁶ Gilligan claims that the morality of responsibility differs from the morality of rights most emphatically in its emphasis on *connection* rather than *separation*. The *relationship* becomes

primary, instead of the (Kantian) individual. Thus the moral dilemma changes from “how to exercise one’s rights without interfering with the rights of others,” to “how to lead a moral life which includes obligations to myself and my family and people in general” (21). Its credo: “Just the fact of being in the world gives me an obligation to do what I can do to make the world a better place to live in, no matter how small a scale that may be on.”

Rather than attempt to deny one’s identity, whether through ego-less detachment from the world (e.g., Schopenhauer) or through aesthetic attention to the Good (e.g., Weil/Murdoch), the concept of identity in relational/communicative ethics is *expanded* to include the experience of interconnection. Similarly, the moral domain is enlarged by the inclusion of responsibility and care in human relationships. Yet Gilligan does not go so far as to deny the importance of the language of rights altogether, as such underlies the necessity of including, in the network of care, the self as well as others. Rather than a replacement of a “masculine” rights-ethic by a “feminine” care-ethic, Gilligan’s expanded perspective allows both voices to speak at once, the former asserting the inviolability of the individual and the latter criticizing the hierarchical perspective of the patriarchal tradition and calling for a freer, web-like image of human life.

Jürgen Habermas has elaborated an approach of “communicative action” in which he too rejects the standard paradigm of consciousness and its associated philosophy of the subject in favor of an inter-subjectivist paradigm. Turning away (like his Frankfurt School mentors) from subject-centered or instrumental reason, Habermas is careful not to abandon reason, which he believes can (and must) be saved as a critical tool—stripped, of course, of centuries of metaphysical trappings. Habermas seeks to reconstruct, like Kant, a moral point of view from which normative claims can be judged with impartiality. Contra Kant, however, he replaces the Categorical Imperative with a discursive moral agreement, produced by reasoning communicants. Drawing, like Gilligan, on research in the psychology of moral and interpersonal development, he posits that our basic moral intuitions stem from “normative presuppositions of moral interaction” that are common to all (competent) social agents. Although, in contradistinction to Murdoch, Habermas ultimately values a rights-based morality (“leaving the question ‘how should I live?’ to the irreducible pluralism of human life”), he joins her in condemning the image of the solitary reflecting moral consciousness prevalent in traditional moral theory. Rather than attending to what is external, however, Habermas suggests, again like Gilligan, that the basis of moral reference must be found in “the community of moral subjects in dialogue” (McCarthy viii). Condemning “empiricist” ethical theories that “even if they were true... could have no enlightening impact because they remain fundamentally cut off from the intuitions of everyday life” (*Moral Consciousness* 47), Habermas avows the futility of ego-denial in any form.⁷ The “world of moral phenomena” can be grasped *only* in “the performative attitude of participants in interaction” (50).

Only discursively can a norm be tested in its claims to fairness. Practical discourse, *pace* Rawls, “does not feature rational egoists prudently contracting behind a veil of ignorance—a procedure that can itself be carried out monologically—but moral agents trying [through discourse] to put themselves in each other’s shoes” (McCarthy viii). Above all, in the reciprocal perspective-taking stance, the *moment* of empathy is part of the discursive procedure itself—part of the

process of coming to a reasoned argument.⁸ Communicative interaction is that in which action is co-ordinated consensually, “with the agreement reached at any point being evaluated in terms of the intersubjective recognition of validity claims” (*Moral Consciousness* 58). An important distinction to be made is one between “communicative” and “strategic” action. Whereas in the latter an actor seeks to influence others (by whatever means) in order to cause the interaction to continue as the first actor desires; in the former one actor seeks to (rationally) motivate another by relying on the bonding effect of the speech act itself. Strategic action is oriented toward success, while communicative action is concerned with understanding.

Thus, transforming Meadian/Rawlsian subjective role-taking into “a public affair, practiced intersubjectively by all involved” (*Moral Consciousness* 198), practical discursive ethics aims as well to deal with Schopenhauerian vulnerability through the reciprocal and mutual recognition of the integrity of the moral agent. The true meaning of interdependence connotes a mutual consideration of rights and responsibilities. “In seeking mutual agreement each [speaker] attempts to get beyond an egocentric viewpoint by taking into account the interests of others and giving them equal weight to his or her own” (McCarthy x). In this way, the theory says, the twin poles of justice and solidarity are guaranteed, and, in the process, are shown to have a common root: “the specific vulnerability of the human species, which individuates itself through sociation” (*Moral Consciousness* 200). Thus, says Habermas, the familiar divide between theories of Duty and Justice and those of Good and Common Weal is annihilated once and for all. Following in the footsteps of Hegel, practical discourse critiques both the abstract universality of justice as it is conceived in individualist, natural rights and Kantian approaches, as well as the concrete particularism of the common good that permeates the post-Aristotelian tradition.

The Ocular Stance

[W]e all carry with us a great question. There is something questioning within us... [a]nd once in a while, for no particular reason, we suddenly know the answer, we glimpse the answer.

— David Steindl-Rast

We have now covered several of the most prevalent trends in modern moral theory, each reacting in a distinctive fashion to conventional post-Kantian subject-centered morality. Now the discussion must turn to the realm of nature, and the applicability (or lack of such) of these strands of moral theory for environmental ethics. Having now elaborated the communicative paradigm as a foil to Murdochian attention, let us turn to what I have been calling the broader “ocular” attitude towards ethics and the earth. Murdoch defines the mystical stance as “a second thought about the matter [of human existence, which] reflects the uneasy suspicion that perhaps after all man is not God” (Conradi 18). Attacking, specifically, the existentialist hero and archetype of the modern age (“adventurous, godless, and guiltless”) she equates such a conception of human nature with an irresponsible neo-Romantic moral nihilism. By way of contrast, Murdoch points out that mysticism shows us freedom and virtue as understanding of (or obedience to) the Good. While the former conception is “a natural mode of being in the capitalist era,” the mystical vision offers a much deeper critique—one that emphasizes both the slowness and the

difficulties inherent in moral change. Like his existentialist counterpart, the mystical archetype is a “man of tension,” but here the tension is not between Will and Nature but rather between Nature and the Good. Having abandoned traditional religion, she is haunted by a sense of the reality and unity of a spiritual world—“spirituality” being here defined as both “experience, a direct knowledge of absolute Spirit in the here and now,” and “praxis, a knowledge that transforms the way I live out my life in this world” (Capra, Steindl-Rast & Matus 12). The mystical moral agent longs to fill the gap left in the wake of (the anthropomorphically conceived) God’s fall. This gap is precisely, says Murdoch (echoing Ernst Bloch) the space in which moral freedom may be realized. Cautioning against overly grandiose claims for the mystical approach, Murdoch insists on both the distance to be covered and the inevitable incompleteness of even the most expansive and liberating moral theory. In sum, whereas the existentialist tends to egoism (or despair), the mystic, “guilty, muddled, yet not without hope,” comes across as a humble character, both skeptical optimist and a hardened ameliorist.

Seeing-in-the-World

Murdoch’s mysticism, it must be understood, is a non-esoteric one, or at least as non-esoteric as mysticism can be. It is, she claims, an “empirical” mysticism, and as we have seen is closely tied to a highly ocular conception of the world. Seeing no necessary dichotomy between mysticism and logic (*pace* Bertrand Russell), she argues for a non-esoteric clarity of vision that allows the individual to be fully engaged morally as well as politically.¹⁰ There is a philosophical genealogy to this argument. Spinoza, (called, “the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers” by, of all people, Russell) deemed this to be the correct and proper way of seeing the world.¹¹ Feuerbach also claimed to experience something of a revelation in the visual: “I learnt logic at a German university, but optics, the art of seeing, I learnt for the first time in a German village, [realizing that] the philosopher... must have nature as his friend, he must know her not only from books but face to face.”¹² Henri Bergson picked up, in this respect if little else, where Feuerbach left off, detailing in his own work a process of intuitive empathy whereby the subject-object/observer-observed gap is minimized, if not eliminated completely. The essence of Bergsonian philosophy lies in the understanding of the movement of life, a dynamic “poetic empiricism” that purports to break down the mystical-dialectic distinction.

What these thinkers share, despite significant differences, is a common vision of vision—an attempt to explore the convergence of experience, perception and morality. Admittedly, a flair for the abstruse is also a common characteristic of these writers, but the essential elements of their conception can be gleaned for our purpose—relating an empirical/experiential ethics to the nonhuman realm. Part and parcel of this project is a high priority given to *supererogation*—acting without thought of rewards, whether in this life or the hereafter. Both Schopenhauer and Murdoch speak of the dilemma of “purpose,” and how the truly ethical person must pass beyond the promise of rewards and threats of retribution, emerging as “one who has begun to grasp the absolute ‘for nothing-ness’ and absolute lack of consolation in the Good” (Conradi 14). In overcoming purpose, Schopenhauer predicts a realization of human limits and contingency, and this (so goes the argument) allows for “a reverent sympathy with the rest of creation” (Murdoch

Metaphysics 72). Pace Spinoza and Feuerbach, Schopenhauer rejects pantheism (because it “signifies nothing”), yet, along with them argues that the chief factor in proper education is an “acquaintance with the world—the achievement of which we may designate the object of all education [and which] should...depend...on *perception* always preceding *conduct*” (Schopenhauer 230).

It is at this point that Kantian “disinterestedness” returns. Seeing nature, with clarity of vision, is an affirmation of *separation* as well as *belonging*—for on the level of purpose and desire, nature must first separated if it is to be afterwards integrated into our entire experience of ethical behavior. Shifting our focus from humanity to the whole of the life-world, we recognize the limits of thought and language in apprehending the unfathomable mystery of existence. It is a misleading (though, as Murdoch admits “attractive”) distinction made by modern thinkers, between experiential fact and moral value, that results first in a perfunctory account of morality, leading eventually to a wholesale “marginalisation of the ethical” (*Sovereignty* 25). Moral value cannot, it seems, be *derived* from experiential fact, as presumed in the Kantian tradition. As Murdoch argues, although “science” (conceived here, for didactic purposes, as morally neutral) can indeed instruct morality at certain points (and perhaps change its direction), science cannot in any way contain morality, nor moral philosophy. Above all, “moral concepts do not move about within a hard world set up by science and logic” (27).

At this point, two points can perhaps be extracted as primary: 1) a recognition of the limits of reason (human knowledge), and 2) the possibility of supererogation arising from selfless attention to nature, works of art, the other, or the Good. The first issue, namely the acknowledgement of both the meaningless and the meaningful in existence, can lead (past Schopenhauer) to a recognition of the limits of scientific knowledge, and ergo, of human capabilities. It is not through knowledge but through *experience* of the world that we are brought into relationship with it. Which brings us back to mysticism: “All thinking which penetrates to the bottom arrives at ethical mysticism.... What is rational [inevitably] reaches the nonrational” (Schweitzer 204). Our treatment of nature must be based upon the fact that we can never entirely know the facts, we will (likely) never come to know the significance of the world, and yet we must go on regardless, treating the other with “regard.” Nature, as well as art, “illuminates accident and contingency... the limitations of time and the discursive intellect, so as to enable us to survey complex or horrible things which would otherwise appall us” (Murdoch *Metaphysics* 8). Indeed, nature inspires precisely *because* it is separate—like Murdoch’s great object of art, it is “for nothing” beyond itself. In sum, if the connection of attention to the art-object is made to morality, what entails is a rejection of the use-principle in favor of a disinterested empathy. But perhaps “empathy” is the wrong term, as it implies (human) concepts of pity and connection due to similarity. Any ocular ethics of the nonhuman realm must be based on *regard*—perhaps somewhat “cold,” but for this reason more effective with respect to an appreciation of difference.

The Limits of Language?

There are, indeed, things which cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

In the past century a number of thinkers have pointed to the limits of language in getting to the deeper truths of human existence. Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, uncovered the rise of logocentrism with regard to ethics, which, he concludes, ultimately escapes language and discourse. Outside speech, outside demonstrable conventions of intelligibility and falsification, lie all things moral, as well as all things aesthetic. “In drastic *ethical* contrariety to the logical positivists, for whom such domains are of the order of non-sense, but in *technical* concurrence with them, Wittgenstein contracts the bounds of what can meaningfully be said” (Steiner 102). The categories of felt being to which silence (and silence only) gives access, are not therefore trivial or factitious, but are, accordingly, the most important and life-transforming categories available to human beings. It is this existential realm on the other side of language that defines our humanity. The truly *human* being of at least the early Wittgenstein is the man or woman most open to the ethical and the spiritual—“he who keeps silent before the essential.” George Steiner interprets this mute receptivity (which “links Wittgenstein to certain kinds of reticent mysticism”) as an intuited antithesis to the Hebraic-Hellenic definition of ‘man’ as “one endowed with the imperative of speech, as one ‘having to speak’ in order to realize his humanity.” Not entirely passive silence, the truly free person makes her statement not in words but in right conduct, a notion also found in mainstream Buddhist thought traditions as well as in Tolstoy’s writings on religion and morality. Murdoch also cites the moral sense of the *Tractatus*, where “‘I’ become an artist, or a mystic, ethics and aesthetics being one [for Wittgenstein], looking at and accepting the world as a whole” (*Metaphysics* 28). Wittgenstein’s conclusion is that it is impossible to talk about ethics at all: “Ethics is transcendental.” Cryptically, the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem: what cannot be said is made manifest. From this Murdoch concludes that we experience or express value more purely in the detached attentive mode of visualization. Steiner takes *Tractarian* ethics further, asking what language has to say about *any* experience beyond the bounds of logic and rationality. “Grammatical-logical discourse is radically at odds with... matter, with pigment, stone, wood, or metal” (Steiner 16). In the visual aesthetic object, “the focused light of both interpretation (the hermeneutic) and valuation (the critical-normative) lies within the work itself.”¹⁴

What does this critique warrant with respect to the nonhuman world, to the human/nature problem? Steiner suggests that the “Byzantine domination” of “parasitic discourse” over immediacy (and thus of the *critical* over the *creative*) is symptomatic of our confounding desire for interposition, for control, “for explicative-evaluative mediation between ourselves and the primary” (38). Moreover, questioning the limits of language “takes us to the frontiers between conceptualization of a rational-logical sort and other modes of experience” (18). The language-act *aims* to exploit and exhaust “the entirety of the sensory sets, series and combinations latent in imaginings” (54). In short, within this critique of language lies a critique of an ethics or morality based upon speech, discourse, and communication. Even Habermas allows that “[i]t is difficult to answer the basic objection of ecological ethics: How does discourse ethics which is limited to subjects capable of speech and action, respond to the fact that mute creatures are also vulnerable” (*Moral Consciousness* 210). Not only mute creatures, Steiner might argue, but also communicative beings like ourselves may be resistant to discursive ethics because of the greater

range of experience that cannot adequately be voiced. Certainly, with respect to non-human nature, discourse ethics belies its limits: if there is any communication to be had between humans and the nonhuman, it will not be (with the possible exception of a few highly-trained great apes) linguistic communication, but rather sensory or visual. But again, we come up against Schopenhauer's paradox. If *Logos* has such prevalence, even if unwarranted, how can we possibly break out of the language barrier? How can we speak about an ethics based on silent experience? Can such be called ethics at all?

Ocular Phenomenology and Ethics of Nature

Speech can neither articulate the deeper truths of consciousness, nor can it convey the sensory, autonomous evidence of the flower, of the shaft of light, of the birdcall at morning... —that which the unspeakable and unsayable visitations of the freedom and mystery of being may communicate at privileged moments.

— George Steiner

In the past century of Western thought, thanks to progressive waves of Marxism, structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism and various forms of so-called post-modernism, the myth of the cognitively coherent and ethically responsible ego has been dissolved, and as such we can no longer hold to either Kant's "subjective universality," or, according to some, any belief in personal or communal "truth-seeking." The ocular paradigm discussed in this paper looks beyond the text to perception, developing an ethic based upon several critical themes: *detachment-affirmation, art, mystery, non-purposiveness, and silence.* These elements overlap, of course, but we shall attempt now to bring them together in more coherent form.

A staple of contemporary arguments for environmental ethics is the need for a "bio-centric" view of the world (as opposed to the conventional anthropocentric and patriarchal one)—a simple idea enjoining the treatment of the nonhuman on its/their own terms, i.e., extending the Kantian Categorical Imperative to "life" or "sentience" itself. As discussed above, though flirting with (ontological) holism, bio-centric ethics in its ocular form necessitates an epistemological detachment from nature, in terms of utility and purpose. Rather than a Daoist "fusion" with nature, what is enjoined is we a more down to earth recognition of the "uselessness" of the nonhuman (in human terms). In this important sense, nature is ultimately beyond human knowledge, human morality, and theories of rights or justice. The closest we can come to nature in our separation is through *experience*—including both perception and intuition. In this light, Werner Marx has investigated the possibilities of a "neo-phenomenological" ethics of compassion, focusing on the transformative powers of basic human experience, which can lead us away from an attitude of indifference to one of active concern for other beings. Marx develops the concept of a plurality of interconnected life-worlds that constitute human experience. Rather than an undifferentiated totality with a set of easily explicated rules of behavior, the world we confront is in fact an assemblage of smaller worlds within a larger whole. What this presages, according to Marx, is the recognition of the diversity of human experience, as well as its interconnectedness. He proposes an overarching ethics described as "reason borne by emotion and by intuitively rational seeing *and* listening to the Other and not a cold,

calculating, and planning reason" (*Phenomenological Ethics* 64).

Perhaps, after all this, we come back to Plato: moral education as a change of self-being. Moral subjects begin to see different objects—they have a deeper and better understanding of the world. As Murdoch puts it: "The pilgrim will not only produce a better series of acts, he will have a better series of mental states" (*Metaphysics* 177). Plato provided a distinction that has been alluded to throughout this essay: between *noesis*, the mystical contemplation of the Form of the Good, and *dianoia*, the discursive understanding of selfless wisdom. It is difficult, if not impossible to join these two ethical precepts, and perhaps the best we can achieve is an *ethos* that recognizes the claims of vision as well as speech. As noted, if we go too far towards undifferentiated holism (by self-annihilation, or whatever means) we may miss the trees for the forest, or the person for the people.

Conclusions

Is an ethics possible today that does not depend upon either transcendent beings or upon an appeal to human rationality?

— Werner Marx

Iris Murdoch once lamented the "socializing" of morality—i.e., the tendency for public or political morality to subsume the whole of what is called ethics: groups (human) placed above individuals, soul-study equated with narcissism. But what *about* other people? Can an ocular or neo-phenomenological ethics deal adequately with the sufferings of our own species? This question, in some ways, reflects the continuing rift in environmental theory between so-called "deep" versus "social" ecologists, the former avowing a mystical holism (often flecked with anti-humanism) and the latter the use and importance of revolutionary social praxis to ecological change. While the first skips society, the second tends to neglect the importance of inner experience. It is vitally important to get beyond this dichotomy, perhaps by adopting instead a modified holistic perspective that accepts that we are, fundamentally, all part of a whole, but that also recognizes the irreducible individuality of not only human beings but of other species and individual members of species. Although we must be wary of anthropomorphically ascribing "rights" to nature, the nonhuman can provide a ground or source of values and ideals, in addition to standing before us as an ineffable partner in our existence.

From the previous, wide-ranging discussion of contemporary moral theory, we may glean the following points: first, there does not appear to be a simple quick-fix remedy to the continuing strength of Baconian instrumental rationality and anthropocentrism—any sort of new paradigm will have to be based, not on a diametrically-opposed holistic pantheism, but upon a tempered holism, pragmatic and ameliorist; second, more emphasis should be laid upon "being," not in any esoteric sense, but in the experiential quality of existence, experiencing, as phenomenologists would have it, the life-worlds in their plurality; third, the separation between ourselves and nature cannot be denied¹⁶—that separation is *real*, but it is precisely this which may enjoin an appreciation of Nature's value. Thus, it is at heart a re-conceptualization of principles; where once, in the instrumental model, what was alien was to be used for human purposes without restraint, the new paradigm would enjoin a more serious look at what is outside of our realm as human beings.¹⁷ As such, our very separation from nature must be the

basis of any environmental ethics. As McKibben puts it, the idea that the rest of creation may count for as much as we do is a “quietly radical” concept, foreign even to many environmentalists.¹⁸

Notes

1. Peter Marshall: “The most important cultural revolution in the twentieth century has been the transference of the insights of ecology from the scientific to the moral and political field. Ecology in a broad sense... is used both in a descriptive and a normative way to suggest how we ought to act” (Marshall 337).
2. Lecture, Cambridge University, Social and Political Theory Graduate Seminar, December 1992.
3. “If you imagine,” declaims Schopenhauer, “in so far as it is approximately possible, the sum total of distress, pain and suffering of every kind which the sun shines upon in its course, you will have to admit it would have been much better if the sun had been able to call up the phenomena of life as little on the earth as on the moon” (Schopenhauer 147).
4. Schweitzer: “Indian thought, like that of Schopenhauer, is full of contradictions because it cannot help but make concessions over and over again to the will to live, which persists in spite of all the negations of the world, though it will not admit that these are concessions. Negation of the will to live is only consistent with itself if it decides to put an end to physical existence” (Schweitzer 157).
5. The psychology of women’s development, which has consistently revealed a distinctive orientation toward relationship and interdependence, implies a contextual mode of judgment and “a different moral understanding, bringing a different point-of-view and the possibility of ordering human experience *in terms of different priorities*” (Gilligan 172). Women, the argument goes, experience the reality of connection more intuitively than do men, arriving more easily at an understanding of life that recognizes the limits of autonomy and control. Not only does such point to a life of minimal violence, but also to a maturity realized through interdependence and “taking care.”
6. In a talk at Cambridge University, Gilligan compared Rawls’s stance as that of the big fish in a well-known cartoon, in which three fishes, of varying size, exclaim different views of the justice of the world as the largest proceeds to devour the middle-sized fish, which in turn is set to swallow the smallest. Gilligan’s point: it is easy to expect justice from “objectivity” when one is (like Rawls) not in any way disadvantaged in societal terms.
7. Habermas quotes P.F. Strawson to this effect: “[Although w]e can sometimes look with an ‘objective eye’ on the behaviour of the normal and the mature... [b]eing human, we cannot, in the normal case, do this for long, or altogether” (*Moral Consciousness* 47).
8. “[A]rguments played out in the individual consciousness,” says Habermas, “or in the theoretician’s mind are no substitute for real discourse” (*Moral Consciousness* ix).
9. Habermas: “[M]orality... cannot protect the one without the other” (*Moral Consciousness* 200).
10. An example of such a character from Murdoch’s own fictional writings would be Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, a mystical hero who does not fail to be thoroughly engaged.

11. Reportedly, Spinoza shunned the life of academics to earn his living as an optical craftsman, as if to emphasize his dedication to a reformation of vision.

12. Inspired by Spinoza, Feuerbach connected morality with visual sensation: “[A]part from pantheism everything is egoistic self-seeking, vanity, greed, mercenariness, idolatry” (Phipps 70).

13. MacIntyre: “Reason is calculative; it can assess truths of fact and mathematical relations but nothing more. In the realm of practice it can only speak of means. About ends it must be silent (12).

14. Steiner 17. Lamenting, like Schweitzer before him, the dominance of ‘secondary’ discourse in particular, Steiner, characteristically, waxes poetical: “[T]he Saturn of explication devours that which it adopts. Or more precisely, it makes it servile” (38).

15. Steiner calls this “an ontological axiom of ineradicable undecidability” (60).

16. “It is fine to argue, as certain poets and biologists have argued—that we must learn to fit in with nature... [b]ut none [few] of us, on the inside, quite believe it” (McKibben 26).

17. Taylor: “[Human-centredness] appears in the defining characteristics of moral theory—such as the maximization of general happiness, or action on a maxim that can be universalized, or action on a norm that all participants could accept in unconstrained debate. The claims of the non-human (or at the very outside the non-animate) cannot be heard in frameworks of this kind” (102). Sociology, as well, rests on what has been called a ‘human exemptionalism’ paradigm, in which is made an implicit assumption of ‘success’ being the growth, and inevitability of ‘production’, which of course goes back to Marx and the classical economists of the eighteenth century. The expectation of Catton and Dunlap, in an article entitled “A New Ecological Paradigm for Post-Exuberant Sociology” (1980) that “environmental sociology” would create a “New Ecological Paradigm” and anchor nature completely in social theory has not, however, been fulfilled.

18. Even Henry David Thoreau, nineteenth-century poster boy for early environmentalism, went to his solitary retreat at Walden Pond to redeem his human soul, not Nature. Thoreau was not so much concerned with man’s desecration of Nature as with man’s desecration of himself.

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