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# SEARCHING FOR ETHICS' GROUNDING: A CASE FOR MORAL FEELING AND THE HUMAN RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE

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## Abstract

The following essay considers the question of how ethical and moral theories are possible in conjunction with the "death of God" as conceptualized by Nietzsche and other continental thinkers. I argue that ethical and moral action become possible through, and require, a deep affective experience of something as having absolute value, and that this kind of experience of absolute value can be found in human beings' relationship with nature. Using the work of Bernard Williams and John Russon, I argue that the climate crisis facing the planet makes apparent this relationship, and makes possible a particular kind of affective response to nature which, in turn, makes ethical action possible.

## Searching for Ethics' Grounding: A Case for Moral Feeling and the Human Relationship to Nature

As Nietzsche heralded the death of God, he identified a number of consequences of this intellectual event. First, Nietzsche celebrated the end of the idea that ethics and morality are determined and handed down by a deity, as well as the sweeping aside of the idea that in order for one to be good, there must be a moral authority as the source of what is good. With academic scholarship and scientific investigation dismantling and replacing foundational aspects of Christianity and religious belief, Nietzsche saw "the collapse of any theistic support for morality" (Crowell), and that "the belief in the Christian God has become unworthy of belief" (Nietzsche, 67). For Nietzsche, the end of the notion of a divine source of morality and absolute value was "a liberating opportunity to take responsibility for meaning, to exercise creativity" (Crowell). Without belief in a divine power determining morality, people are free and responsible to formulate their own conception of moral action and their own attribution of value. Nietzsche describes this freedom thus:

. . . we philosophers . . . feel, when we hear the news that “the old god is dead,” as if a new dawn shone on us . . . At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be as bright; at long last our ships may venture out again . . . all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea lies open again, perhaps there as never yet been such an “open sea” (68).

With the death of God, ethics is placed firmly where it should be, and its source is acknowledged to be what it is and always has been according to Nietzsche: within human beings. For Nietzsche, there is nothing behind value judgments other than one's own will (Leiter). While in the end the view is more complex than this, the important take away for this paper is that the death of God is the death of the idea that there is objective or absolute value. Nietzsche had his own ideas about what ethics and morality should look like in the face of this, but for the purpose of my argument the death of God presents both a loss and gain: the loss of a millennia-old source of absolute value, and the gain of one's agency (and the recognition of that agency) to determine for oneself what is good and bad, right and wrong.

With the loss of objective value comes the prospect of nihilism and the pain and confusion that can result from it. Several decades before Nietzsche, Hegel described this pain: “The pure concept, however, or infinity, as the abyss into which all being sinks, must characterize the infinite pain . . . the feeling that God Himself is dead” (Groom, Fritz, 29). Nietzsche identifies early on in his writing a “shadow”, as though “some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt” (68). Rose Pfeffer provides a good understand of the predicament facing human beings:

With the loss of a sense of purpose, resulting from the denial of a teleological universe, the foundation of a moral world order is shattered. Man (*sic*) no longer possesses the ideals and absolute goals toward which to strive. He (*sic*) has lost all direction and purpose . . . He (*sic*) is lost, without a God and without the promise of a better world.

Having lost the most readily available source of absolute value, one falls into an infinity of possible values with no handhold. The feeling of responsibility that comes with the freedom to determine value, and thus morality, for oneself, can be paralyzing. Each thing encountered or considered must be evaluated independently and its value sought by each individual moral agent for themselves. With no solid prescriptions of value, Hegel's abyss opens, and the prospect that nothing has value looms. I contend however, that additionally distressing is the endless internal search for something on which to base one's system of value, meaning, and morality. The turmoil and confusion of this search for moral solidity has no equal, for without moral solidity, coherence and meaning cannot be built and relief from the search cannot be found.

At this point in the discussion, I find it necessary to make apparent an important distinction. I am not arguing that in order to achieve an ultimate grounding for ethics and morality there must in fact be something of absolute value. I do not mean to suggest that morality necessarily requires an objective value. On the contrary, I believe, as Nietzsche did, that behind morality there is nothing but our own human formulations of value, and behind

these formulations of value is moral feeling. I am arguing that the *experience* of something as having an absolute value, whether positive or negative value, is essential to constructing a meaningful understanding of the world, and therefore for constructing an ethical theory for moral action. At its foundation, ethics is a way to find the relative importance of various things under consideration – an ethical dilemma is the struggle to determine what, in a given situation, is most important.

Back to the problem at hand: with the death of God, we have found ourselves without our most familiar source of absolute value, and as the above distinction clarifies, what we have truly lost is the most readily available source of the *experience* of absolute value. There are plenty of ethical theories offering their best understanding of what is most important and how that can be determined. Various deontologies, utility principles and virtue systems offer accounts of what is the most important good, and yet often the question of how they are ultimately grounded remains unanswered. To illustrate this, it is worth looking at how the Euthyphro Dilemma has been extended to any systematic ethics. The Euthyphro Dilemma finds religion's account of morality to be without substance because it either 1) determines the good, in which case it could decree things normatively considered to be immoral, such as murder, to be moral, or it 2) merely identifies the good, in which case something else more foundational must function as the grounding for determining what is moral. Mark Taylor summarizes the point thus:

Systematic ethics, by their nature, identify almost all moral obligations as contingencies that rely on an ultimate self-sufficient principle. Such a principle is reputedly good by its nature and serves as the anchor point from which all other duties originate. In fact, the rest of the system is really just an extended explication of the foundational principle. If we were to find that the anchor point is *not* independent or necessary, then we should reject that whole system (46).

The problem, Taylor contends, is that all systems of ethics fall victim to the Euthyphro Dilemma – in the case of consequentialism, Taylor concludes (after much argumentation that will not be covered here) that “(UP)[the utility principle] is the foundation of Utilitarian morality, and there exist counter-examples showing that (UP) cannot be equivalent to moral goodness, so (UP) and Utilitarianism are not related ontologically to moral goodness” (50). All of this is to say that the problem of experiencing Hegel's abyss or Nietzsche's nihilism at the loss of the experience of absolute value is not easily solved by other groundings for ethics, and that if this phenomenological experience of chaos and an infinity of moral ambiguity cannot be given some kind of handhold or foundation, then substantive moral action becomes at best exceedingly difficult and at worst inconceivable. There is a phenomenological element to ethics that, as with many phenomenological insights, goes overlooked and yet must always already be the case in order for moral action to occur at an individual level: one must *feel* that something is important in order for one to be moved to act. To be intellectually convinced is to respond to a strong argument, but more basically, to be convinced is a *feeling* and an *experience*. One can think that something is important, but unless one also experiences it as important, then impetus for action will be extraordinarily difficult to come by. The conclusion is this: without a

moral feeling to arouse, galvanize, and thus provoke action, the best ethical system (whether deontology, consequentialism, etc.) is impotent.

This is illustrated by considering a mental illness like depression. A person with severe enough depression will find motivation for actions of any kind significantly difficult. Although cognitive capacities can be affected by depression, what is most handicapped is one's affective responses. The world is not experienced as significant, important, or meaningful – without the feeling that things have importance, the depressed person often does not feel any incentive to carry out a project of any kind. The result can be that the person's rational capacities are entirely unaffected, but even the most carefully constructed argument for actions of any kind, let alone moral ones, are not convincing to the point of catalyzing action. The depressed person does not feel or experience the importance of a thing, and thus is unable to generate sufficient motivation. Rational thought and strong argument alone are an insufficient grounding for an ethical system, because rational arguments do not fulfill the requirement of feeling morally moved. Good arguments can contribute to or cause one's affective response – a good argument can be the thing that makes one experience the value of a thing. But the catalyst for action remains the *experience* of value.

I find an interesting source of support in Robert Elliot's book *Faking Nature*. Elliot puts forth a very complex and careful metaethical theory and grounding for value. Elliot is exceedingly careful to avoid doing exactly what I am proposing – Elliot wants his argument to be solidly grounded on a principle that is completely self-sufficient, and he seeks to justify in this manner all his claims of natural value. And yet, his whole account of value essentially rests on one footnote: "That nature has value is, so to speak, a brute value fact. Although the fact does not admit of further explanation, it requires emphasis and discussion . . ." (Elliot, 157). What Elliot is asserting is contrary to his intended project of finding independent and necessary value that can avoid the pitfalls of the Euthyphro Dilemma. A "brute value fact" is nothing if not something that "just has" value. The claim that something "just has" value is an affective claim. It is feeling and experiencing some thing as important and valuable. In short, it is experiencing absolute value and thus a handhold while falling into Hegel's abyss.

While the experience of something as having value is dismissed as a foundation for ethics because it is capricious, lacking rigor, or far too relative, I would like to contend that the experience of something having value is in fact one of the best possible groundings for ethics, and as discussed above, possibly a requirement for engaging in moral action. The criticisms of capriciousness, lack of rigor and relativity are serious and require discussion, however. A further elucidation of what it means to experience something as having absolute value will help to dispel these worries.

To experience something as having absolute value, there can be no ambiguity at all in that particular experience. Absolute value, or in Elliot's words a "brute value fact", implies an all-encompassing certainty about the value relationship between oneself and the thing experienced. It is not the case that anything we value satisfies this feeling of encompassing certainty. If deeply and thoroughly considered, nearly anything experienced as having value can admit of significant ambiguity – even the value of those one loves most can be consumed and questioned in the yawning jaws of nihilism. This fact is precisely why nihilism is so persistent: What is left is a world of mere appearance and semblance, possessing no certainty or permanence, having no goals, no unity, no truth, no being. "A "horror vacui" seizes man (*sic*) . . .

those “higher values” which the Platonic-Christian tradition falsely endowed with objective validity . . . are in fact merely subjective categories” (Pfeffer 76, 77).

If carefully constructed analytical ethical theories are not enough to convince one of something's value to the point of inspiring substantive action and a handhold in the abyss, then what would be enough to do this while also avoiding being “falsely endowed with objective validity” (Pfeffer)? We can find this very thing in the human relationship with nature. I would like to propose that our relationship to nature, while superficially ambiguous, in is fact far more essential than we generally take it to be, and that the climate crisis makes this essential, given relationship apparent again. Within our complex, technological and domination-based experience of nature, there is a more fundamental, foundational relationship that, though obscured, is in fact original. Through discussion of the work of Bernard Williams and John Russon, I will offer my case for this original givenness as that to which we can turn for the experience of absolute value and a handhold as the abyss of nihilism opens beneath us and our human search for some absolute value troubles us ever more.

We are searching for an experience so powerful, complete, and unambiguous that it serves as a source of the experience of absolute value, and therefore as something solid on which we can build our understanding of the value and importance of other things in our experience. Our relationship with nature satisfies this kind of complete, unambiguous relationship, as John Russon describes:

There is the inexplicable nurturance of the sun . . . and of the earth that is the foundation of stability and consistency – these are two original senses, irreducible forms, that appear compellingly and guidingly for us. These are forms to which we are inexplicably attuned and *to which we owe everything* [emphasis added]. This can be said for the world of nature . . . in general. We only ever occur ourselves *within* the self-occurring realm of nature . . . The fertile earth, the sky that supplies nurturing warmth and clarifying light, and the self-sufficing rhythm of growth, death, and regeneration are not senses we invent or realities we make. *It is only within their context that we occur* [emphasis added] (23).

Here Russon highlights our givenness as biological beings on a natural planet. We fit within the biological processes and natural realities of earth, sky, growth and death in a way that is simply unavoidable; these processes cannot be circumvented. The necessary conditions for our very existence are not contingent – life has developed on the planet in a particular way, and as such it requires and owes everything it is to the given reality of the natural world. We have certain kinds of bodies – mortal bodies, bodies originating in nature. This givenness is not ambiguous, it is not partial, it cannot be questioned. It cannot be questioned because it is the very parameters by which we exist at all, and “It is these realities to which we must answer, and their very reality entails that we will be ruined if we fail to respect them” (Russon, 23). Our relationship to nature is originary in the sense that it is on the basis of nature that we even have the power to question our relationship with nature at all.

Our reality [is] that which exercises its wonderful (. . . both great and terrible) power always within a context of other given wonders, to which we must bring

the appropriate level of honor and respect. All of our accomplishments occur within and in the terms of this *given* world, through our *given* powers (especially our “cunning” power to control nature by turning its powers against itself). That we are definitively constrained by the givenness is shown by the ineffaceability of our death. (Russon, 25)

There is a very specific, unambiguous way in which we are related to nature: nature is that by which there is anything at all, including us. And as Russon indicates, if we do question or doubt this relationship, we do so at our own peril. We may question our relationship to nature and act with hubris in ways that flout what can only be described as a holy bond, but doing so will only bring us more firmly to the absolute value, and to perhaps the only thing that cannot be circumvented.

Bernard Williams gives hints to this kind of relationship in his essay *Must a Concern for the Environment be Centred on Human Beings?* Though Williams’ objective is different than my own, at the end of his argument he considers the idea that “human beings have two basic kinds of emotional relations to nature: gratitude and a sense of peace, on the one hand, terror and stimulation on the other” (238). He goes on to talk about “what might be called *Promethean fear*, a fear of taking too lightly or inconsiderately our relations to nature . . . a sense of an opposition between ourselves and nature, as an old, unbounded and potentially dangerous enemy, which requires respect” (239). He then identifies what he considers to be important about this affective response to nature:

We should not think that if the basis of our sentiments is of such a kind, then it is simply an archaic remnant which we can ignore. For, first, Promethean fear is a good general warning device, reminding us still appropriately of what we may properly fear. But apart from that if it is something that many people deeply feel, then it is something that is likely to be pervasively connected to things that we value, to what gives life the kinds of significance that it has. (239)

This Promethean fear that Williams describes is just the kind of affective response that admits of no ambiguity. The deep-seated, pervasive wariness and respect for nature as both our genesis and the source of our mortality is not the kind of thing that can fall victim to nihilism. Kant illustrates this power of nature in his consideration of the sublime:

Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs, thunder clouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightening and crashes of thunder, volcanoes with their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set into a rage, a lofty waterfall on a mighty river, etc., make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power. (144)

If one does question or disregard the value of nature, what nature *is to us* or *means to us*, one will quickly and surely feel the bite of that mistake: you cannot disregard your biological need for water and food or you will not survive, you cannot disregard the power of the oceans

or you will drown, you cannot disregard the force of the wind or you will be battered, you cannot find the freezing temperature of winter “mere appearance and semblance” (Pfeffer, 76) or you will freeze. One cannot be complacent in the face of the absolute givenness of nature – there will be swift consequences to equivocating about the value relationship between oneself and nature. The abyss of not knowing *what something means* to you or for you suddenly has a hundred handholds in the form of things that have specific and an absolute value, whether positive or negative, to your survival as a general human being, and also to the survival of the specific human body that is you.

And yet there remains an important question: is this the experience of nature that humanity has now? It seems undeniable that our givenness appears more and more as relativity, contingency. Technology increasingly pervades our life, domination of nature has only become more prevalent – at the most extreme in the United States, many of us live constantly in climate controlled dwellings, never experiencing extreme heat or cold for long. We pipe water into the desert and grow manicured green lawns. We have available all manner of food at all times of year. Everything can seem to be possibly contingent; anything can be circumvented if one employs enough cunning. Indeed, even our ties to the planet itself seem to be arbitrary – there have been human beings continuously living off of the planet on the International Space Station in the void of space for over fifteen years. If we assert our human powers enough, it seems as though we are subject to nothing, answerable to nothing, falling once more in a an abyss of an infinity of possible meanings; once more nothing is absolute. But these examples betray themselves. There is nowhere where our utterly unconditional need for oxygen and atmospheric pressure are more urgently palpable than when venturing into space. And back on earth, though for long we have evaded, questioned, and circumvented what Russon calls that “power to which we owe whatever we are,” our answerability, our ultimate givenness is moving back into our awareness in the form of the climate crisis. We cannot control the rising seas, the migrating climates, the droughts, the increasingly vicious storms, the toxic air, all of which we have some amount of responsibility for. Nature is reasserting itself in our experience as Williams’ “old, unbounded and potentially dangerous enemy,” one which requires our respect, lest we risk our own ruin.

Pushing the limits only brings into sharper focus that to which we are truly subject, that which is not contingent, not ambiguous, and cannot be circumvented. That which is once again experienced as absolute – our given relationship to nature as both our origination and our potential destruction – can be our handhold, it can be a grounding to meaning, the source of experiences and feelings of significance, and therefore the impetus for moral action that we are searching for.



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