Questions of Knowledge and Non-Knowledge

For those who care deeply about ethics and justice, it can be jarring to encounter perspectives that marginalise, oversimplify, or treat as trivial these concerns. In political circles, ethical worries are sometimes seen as naïve; in scientific contexts, the focus on 'hard facts' and technical details can displace serious conversations about divergent values – even if values are embedded in the science itself, and in decisions made 'based on the science.' Similarly, concerns about the meaning, significance, and value of nonhuman nature are sometimes dismissed as impractical, nostalgic, or passé. 'It's the Anthropocene,' some say, 'Time to get with the program and accept that humans need to manage the planet' (for a critical discussion of the 'ideology of the Anthropocene', see Baskin 2015).

This discursive environment makes it difficult to articulate philosophical perspectives that challenge narrow anthropocentrism and seek to develop – or reclaim – broader understandings of natural value and human-nature relations. In discussions of climate change, environmental philosophers have retreated almost entirely to a human-focused perspective, while concerns about ecological systems and biodiversity often enter the conversation primarily in relation to 'ecosystem services' or other benefits delivered to human beings. (For recent critical discussion of ecosystem services in the pages of this journal, see Deliège and Neuteleers 2015 and Arias-Arévalo et al. 2018.) As scientists explore the possibility of geoengineering the climate system to counteract global warming, fundamental questions about the ethics of intentional, global-scale climate control are sometimes set aside in discussions of technical plans and implementation schemes that focus on optimising physical climate consequences (but see the articles by Baatz, Kearty, Preston, Stelzer and Schuppert, and Svoboda in a special issue of *Environmental Values* on The Ethics of Engineering the Climate for detailed discussion of ethical issues that go beyond physical consequences).

Although it may be granted that concerns about the *moral* climate are difficult to model, it is worth noting that the pursuit of knowledge about geoengineering and other topics produces not only new knowledge, but new forms of ignorance, or *non*-knowledge (Rayner 2015). Some of this 'non-knowledge' comes in the form of an awareness of how little we know, and some of it comes through the way in which particular forms of knowledge and understanding can *obscure* what is known or unknown. For example, the knowledge that nuclear power is less fossil-fuel intensive than coal may at the same time displace knowledge regarding the environmental, social and other risks of investment in nuclear as compared to other alternatives, like solar and wind. Thus, frameworks for understanding themselves can produce certain forms of ignorance, as particular framings are legitimised and others are delegitimised. Moreover,

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the institutional structures in which people develop ideas, conduct conversations, and live their lives all shape what is known and unknown; what is valued and not valued; what is thought, and what is not thought. Capitalist economies, for example, make some responses to global climate change thinkable, and others more difficult to imagine; the same is true of international political realism, which takes national self-interest to be the core feature of international relations, making global solidarities more difficult to envision (but see Gould 2007 on the idea of overlapping solidarity networks and social empathy as the basis for transnational solidarities).

Questions of knowledge and non-knowledge, and about the possibility of critically considering and thinking beyond dominant modes of understanding, are at stake in the articles in this issue of *Environmental Values*. Each article challenges readers to consider different ways of thinking about ethics, aesthetics, or human relations with the natural world and one another. All are generative, seeking to open up discussion, rather than to close it down.

The issue opens with an article by Anna Schwenkenbecher and Michael Rubin. Their paper considers the practical significance of two key meta-ethical positions – moral realism and moral anti-realism – for environmental ethics. They argue, perhaps surprisingly, that anti-realism may actually be more ‘environmentally friendly’ than a realist stance. Schwenkenbecher and Rubin acknowledge that their view may be counterintuitive; thus, they begin by outlining two apparent advantages of moral *realist* views. On its face, they suggest, moral realism may appear to generate stronger moral motivation and better countenance the intrinsic value of nature. One might think, for example, that realists would be more strongly motivated by their moral convictions than anti-realists because they see morality as grounded in some kind of external authority, rather than contingent on social or biological influences. However, Schwenkenbecher and Rubin argue that neither conceptual nor empirical arguments support this conclusion. In addition, they argue that moral anti-realists *can* countenance nature’s intrinsic value – even if not in exactly the same way as realists. For example, both constructivists and expressivists can value nature non-instrumentally.

After challenging realism’s potential advantages over anti-realism with respect to moral motivation and intrinsic value, Schwenkenbecher and Rubin ask which metaethical position may better support constructive action to address global climate change and other forms of environmental damage. Here, they suggest that anti-realism may have the upper hand: given that prevailing values often fail to take seriously the value of natural world or environmental sustainability more generally, successful environmental action will require value change. However, on Schwenkenbecher and Rubin’s account, moral anti-realists may be more open to revising their views than realists. Thus, anti-realism may better facilitate the kind of conversations, belief revision, and consensus needed to spur environmental action. On the other hand, although

Schwenkenbecher and Rubin don't explicitly consider this possibility, those open to shifting their moral perspectives also may be more susceptible to manipulation by those in power, or to adopting dominant views due to social pressure. Thus, whether anti-realism (and an associated openness to belief change) is friendly to environmental action may depend on the social, institutional, and economic contexts in which ethical deliberation and belief revision take place.

In 'Nonideal Ethics and Arguments against Eating Animals,' Bob Fischer approaches related questions from a slightly different angle. Fischer, too, is concerned with moral motivation, and he is interested in how philosophical arguments translate (or fail to translate) into changes in beliefs and action. He begins his article with an observation: prominent arguments for animal rights – such as those of Peter Singer – often leave students unmoved. However, when he teaches selections from Jonathan Safran Foer's book, *Eating Animals*, students find the arguments significantly more compelling. Why?

Fischer's hypothesis is that Foer ties choices about eating animals to the broader question of what gives life meaning and value – and in Foer's case, this is bound up with what it means to honour relationships, and to embrace, yet also re-envision, traditions over time. Fischer argues that Foer is operating in the realm of non-ideal theory: he acknowledges that moral considerations are 'eclectic,' involving a variety of considerations, and he does not try to offer a knock-down argument for vegetarianism grounded in moral principles he takes to be overriding. Instead, Foer acknowledges the complexity of human moral lives, and the need to appeal to broader considerations about what gives life meaning and direction in determining which values to prioritise in any particular case.

Although Fischer does not put it quite this way, he suggests that what Foer offers is a vision of how one might coherently organise one's life in a way that is compassionate and caring, fitting together what it might mean to take seriously one's relationships to family *and* one's relationships to food. Rather than offer a narrowly ethical argument, Foer is 'offering a vision of a life worth living' (p. 440). In a world where ethical considerations do not automatically trump other values, and where the plural values people hold often come into conflict, Foer offers a way through the thicket. Additionally, as Fischer explains, Foer himself serves as a moral exemplar, as the kind of person each of us might aspire to be. What Foer's book does, then, is get beyond arguments that show what certain values (to which we should, ostensibly, be committed) *entail*, to show us instead how and why those values *matter*, and how to craft a life that honours and embodies them.

The first two papers in this issue focus on ethics, but as we've seen, Fischer's paper clearly signals that it is not only the ethical (at least in a narrow sense) that matters for thinking and rethinking human relationships with animals and the broader world, and the second two papers in this issue shift the

emphasis to the aesthetic. Tom Greaves provides a provocative perspective in 'Movement, Wildness, and Animal Aesthetics,' in which he takes a phenomenological approach to understanding animal aesthetics and its connection to wildness. Greaves argues that 'the primary perceptual sense of our encounters with animals is the sense of the movement through a lived environment' and that '[w]ildness…is the primary aesthetic sense of animal movement' (p. 449). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Greaves focuses on perception as a direct mode of encounter with animals, prior to conceptualisation and interpretation. After arguing for the centrality of movement to our perceptual sense of animals, Greaves links movement to wildness. As he puts it, 'Wildness as open and uncertain temporality is manifest preeminently in the open expressive-responsive movements of animals through their environments' (p. 462). Animal movement embodies the sense of expansiveness and dynamism which is bound up with wildness, which incorporates '[u]ncertainty and the unexpected' (p. 464). Greaves further links the indeterminacy and openness in animal movement to the goals of rewilding, which shuns a predetermined outcome and allows systems the freedom to develop in the absence of intensive human control. Greaves concludes by suggesting that rewilding provides a distinctive way of engaging with animals, one whose openness provides 'at once an aesthetic and ethical response' (p. 468). Greaves' paper thus contributes to ongoing discussions of rewilding, including those in the pages of this journal (see Brook 2018; Drenthen 2018a, b; Gammon 2018; Wynne-Jones, Strouts, and Holmes 2018).

Isabel Balza's article, 'When the Grass Sings: Poetic Reason in Animal Writing,' also focuses on animals, and on a 'return to the senses'. Like Greaves, Balza suggests that something valuable is to be found in a direct, non-conceptually-mediated engagement with animals and the natural world. Drawing on the work of Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano, Balza articulates an approach to 'animal writing' that avoids anthropocentrism and '[captures]…the levels of experience that go beyond the merely rational' (p. 473). Balza argues that Zambrano's 'poetic reason' offers a critical way of accessing animal being – a form of being that humans share with other animals. Sensual awareness, passivity, and grace – the last of which Balza characterises as a gift attained through openness to the world – all play an important role in enabling the 'preverbal knowledge that links us to other animal species' (p. 478).

Balza contrasts this kind of 'animal thinking' with philosophical modes of thinking and writing about the animal – critiqued by Derrida and Coetzee – that 'understand the animal as a theorem,' an abstraction, or symbol. In contrast, animal thinking brings back the *particular* animal *qua* animal (p. 483), allowing us both to experience our own animality and to engage with other animals in a way that avoids the estrangement produced by abstract scientific and philosophical reason. Balza's emphasis on 'active passivity' – a kind of openness to nature that is at the same time *responsive* – shares interesting

commonalities with the Daoist concept of *wuwei*, or 'non-action,' which can also be characterised as 'effortless action' (Slingerland 2007) or 'harmonious engagement' (Hall and Ames 1995). One critical commonality between Balza's active passivity and *wuwei* is the lack of imposition involved in both. What Balza also interestingly suggests is that the imposition is not only bad for (nonhuman) *animals*, it is bad for *us*: it cuts us off from a fundamental aspect of our being. Poetic reason can restore that connection.

The final article in this issue shifts back from the perceptual to the conceptual, and in doing so, provides a broader theoretical lens through which to understand some of the concerns at stake in Greaves' and Balza's work. In 'Reification of Nonhuman Nature,' Teea Kortetmäki explores the concept of reification from critical theory, considering its relevance to environmental philosophy. Reification is a particular form of objectification 'in which certain entities or social relations take on the character of a thing' (Kortetmäki 2019, p. 489; Lukács 1971). More specifically, reification strips away the qualitative features of a thing, yet unlike certain forms of objectification, it is not intentional, and may be both habitual and largely invisible to those engaged in it. With respect to persons, Axel Honneth (2008) describes reification as 'forgetfulness of recognition', in which we fail to engage empathetically toward others and (unthinkingly) perceive them as mere objects (Kortetmäki p. 491). Whereas Honneth's conception of reification focuses primarily on interpersonal relations, Kortetmäki builds on the work of Simon Hailwood, Steven Vogel and others to suggest that the concept is critically relevant to environmental philosophy. As Kortetmäki explains, 'Reification holds promise as a concept for studying the socially induced practices of the misapprehension of the environment, animals and nonhuman nature, practices that have become so normalised in society that some of them are accepted as basic social facts' (p. 504). She goes on to suggest that reification can obscure moral and political questions by reducing them to technical ones, and that understanding reification helps make possible greater recognition of and engagement with these questions. Thus, Kortetmäki shows how reification can narrow and distort thought and action not only in relation to humans and other animals, but in relation to the nonhuman natural world.

All of the articles in this issue help to open up the discursive space for wider and deeper conversations about nonhuman animals and the environment, offering fruitful perspectives on metaethics; animal ethics, aesthetics, and animal thinking; and patterns of objectification that disconnect human beings from human and nonhuman others. All share the goal of making possible new ways of thinking that enable us to reconnect – perceptually, aesthetically, conceptually, and practically – with the ethical, understood broadly to encompass what it might mean to live well together in the world today.

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