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A brief word on ethics.

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Abstract

In this short polemic I gesture toward a recuperation of ethics in the geohumanities, one that grapples with three matters of concern, namely: the configuration of life; apprenticeship; and value.

Key words

Ethics; value; morals

A brief word on ethics

‘Whether we think of it as the consensual representation of Evil or as concern for the other, ethics designates above all the incapacity, so typical of the contemporary world, to name and strive for a Good’.

- Badiou (2012, 30) *Ethics: An essay on the Understanding of Evil*

Ethics – the notion, the commitment, the demand – has something of the adamantine about it. Mixed up with morals, it downright intimidates. In modern ecology and environmentalism, ethics contorts the field between the excesses of “humanitarian prattle” (Badiou 2012, 32), and the recursive proposition of a “future perfect” (Jankélévitch 2015, 153) in which the Anthropos contrives images of thought and justice set against idealised representations of Evil. The conceit arises, not because of the matter of ethics per se, but through the enervation of ethical expression in its conflation with specious and inapt frames of moral adjudication, resentment and indignation (Berardi 2012, 11; Newlands 2018, 170). It is precisely these modes of resentment that perpetuate somatic and intellectual incapacity when it comes to thinking and practising ethics, not least in the geohumanities.

Criticisms of moral philosophy's envelopment of ethics are not new, yet contemporary environmental politics insists, inexorably, on the promulgation of moralising norms as a legitimate backdrop to, and technique for policy formulation. The United Nations' (2018) Sustainable Development Goals are a remarkable case in point, whereby the regurgitation of conceptually tepid targets serves to both retroactively greenwash the failure of its desultory prequel, the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations 2015), and to future-proof a largely settled atmosphere of liberal morality in geopolitics. When and how, for example, did the intellectually bankrupt concept of 'offsetting', carbon or otherwise, ever come to be mistaken for ethics? Ditto, 'sustainability'? It is a modern concordat in 'ethics' that might be described, at best, as comfortably numbing.

Elsewhere, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (2019) special report on Climate Change and Land constitutes an ambitious commingling of what Rosi Braidotti (2013, 141) describes as 'schizoid coincidences' – those faltering attempts to ethically reconcile the irreconcilable; the apotheosis of which is the baked-in belief that one can celebrate, simultaneously, over-consumption and ecological degradation alongside the flourishing of the human species.. Not only do such efforts revalorise the primacy of the human in the ethical field, but they also rely upon a tired recapitulation of moral engineering figured through what the report describes as 'demand side mitigation options' (United Nations 2015), emblemised, but not limited to, inducements to shift dietary preferences away from meat. Targeting such "gut apprehensions" (Whatmore 2002, 163) is not, in of itself, politically insensible when worked at an affective register. However, targeted through the register of moral inscription there is little to distinguish, in vocation and tactic, between the IPCC and *Weight Watchers*. Climate change, obesity, bulimia, land degradation are, to be sure, all part of the same irrepressible 'cosmic roar' (Braidotti 2013, 166), but they are not quietened by a universalising moral dampening, or by the imperatives conjured by the

industry of the Anthropocene (Colebrook 2016, 82). Admittedly, going after policy makers in a Spinozist-Nietzschean fashion for not disambiguating morals from ethics is perhaps unfair, but then again, given the current planetary stakes, why not?

How then, does one recuperate, or rather, rescue, ethics from its imbrication in moral politicking, such that its proper name stands in for speculative affirmation? Speculative because, insofar as conceptual commitments go, one cannot be sure of how bodies, worlds and things will play out, and affirmative because, well – let us slow down for moment. Affirmation, in this instance, does in part hinge on new materialist and vitalist approaches of late, but it does not seek to add to some splendorous chorus of unabated joy and good-humoured conviction to all things. There is, in sharing Paul Harrison’s (2015) suspicions of affirmation in this genre, space for hesitation and room for ambivalence. Indeed, “...affirmation is never simply a question of saying ‘yes’, as if something were given to us ready-made that we *could* affirm” (Sharpe et al. 2014, 116). Welded together, speculative affirmation does not cohere as an ethico-methodological schematic for the social sciences and humanities, but as a (perhaps tantalisingly/infuriatingly) diffuse approach – made up of many as yet, untold, lived experiments that gesture between past, present, and future. What does this mean for a definition of ethics? In jettisoning its enduring and complex association with Aristotelian portraits of ‘the good life’ (Segal 2017), ethics can instead be considered an ongoing and experimental speculation in how to generate – and attend to - different forms, atmospheres, spaces, affects, bodies and materialities of existence. This enfolding of ethics and ontology is characteristic of recent cultural geographic energies conceptually invested in, *inter-alia*, posthumanist futures, a Foucauldian-inflected techniques of the self, or non-representational entanglements (for a recent review of such work, see Williams 2020). The trade-off, however, for this onto-ethical meshing, as geographer Clive Barnett (2011) identifies, is the loss of - or reluctance to countenance - ‘normativity’, at least in its strongest

form. Is the elision of normativity from an ethical geohumanities a bad move? Is the consequence inevitably an abrogation of responsibility, intellectual or otherwise? In short, no, but there is a sliver in which normativity might bear a little re-purposing. Here the work of María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) is instructive. Itself harnessing the theoretical charge of work by Isabelle Stengers, the ‘normative’ in this instance does not entail an ‘oughtness’ in morality, but instead transposes obligations into types of generative constraint which themselves develop only in relation to specific events and milieus and their concomitant unfolding. Whether one categorises the promulgation of these generative constraints ‘care’ or, to borrow once more from Barnett (2014, 152) a ‘modest normativity’, their unfolding nonetheless remains a pointed rejection of a transcendental and thus colonising apparatus in ethics, but without losing a modicum of sensibility in the form of speculative affirmation. If ethics is not a mode of speculative affirmation, then it ceases to be ethics, and what we mistake for ethics in the political-ecological domain is, in actuality, an inadequate and risk-averse recapitulation of the policy-fronted status-quo.

To reiterate that a speculative mode of ethics should not be confused with an unalloyed “vertiginous affirmation” (Garcia 2018, 147) of life, this minor recuperation of ethics is tempered by three points of concern.

The first attends to Judith Butler’s (2015, 195) question, “...which social configuration of ‘life’ enters into the question, how best to live?”. Too often the emphasis in ethical discourse is placed on the clause, ‘how best to live’, with little repute for the ‘configuration’ of life at stake. In this regard it is clear why experimental ecological politics – such as Ecuador’s and Bolivia’s constitutional recognition of the non-human – tend to entrench rather than dissolve ontological divisions characteristic of modernity’s cosmology (de la Cadena 2015). Here, where ethics used to be based on the proximity of bodies, Andean ecosophical atmospheres are now mapped by inadequate configurations of existence marked

by ontological polarity (Gerlach, 2017). On this point of concern, geographers have done more than most in substantiating the singularity of experience and the importance of more-than-human configurations in cultivating a speculative form of ethics (see, for example, Ginn et al. 2014). Yet there remains something of a reluctance – perhaps reasonably so given the risk of speaking-for-others - to engage in the creation of new values that, in Deleuzian terms, live-up to the excesses of encounter and event.

To ‘better’ attend to this matter of lively and eventful configuration, the second point of concern insists that ethics be understood as a form of apprenticeship (Lorraine 2011, 119). This stands to rebuff the Western comedy of ethics as living by code. “You want to *live* ‘according to nature’?” snorts Nietzsche (1998, 10), “Oh...what deceit lies in these words!”. Instead, trade-in nature, its elegiac promise of eternity (Morton 2007), and its normative impulses for a hands-on apprenticeship, one immured in what Puig de la Bellacasa describes as a, “thick, impure, involvement in a world where the question of how to care needs to be posed” (2017, 6). Here the point, or vocation, of the apprenticeship in ethics is not to preserve Life, nor protect the Territory, but to cultivate responsibility toward incorporeal modes of becoming (Roberts 2019). A not insubstantial undertaking. Bordering, perilously so, on the seemingly hubristic. And yet the techniques, habits and experiments that comprise this tentative apprenticeship in ethics can be modest in extent, even if they demand a lifetime of repetitional practice. Part of the apprenticeship, predictably enough, might involve a Spinozist-Nietzschean affirmation of will, for better and for worse, and in spite of how miserable one’s life might unravel. So far, so dour. But this apprenticeship against *ressentiment* might itself be propagated by a series of lived experiments, less intimidating in scale albeit more left field than we’ve, hitherto, been trained to expect. William Connolly (2017) chances a number of micropolitical experiments in this regard, from ‘priming’ dreams before sleep to engaging in long-term neurotherapy (usual health warnings apply; check with

medic/Freud before commencement of said experiments). Regardless of technique, the upshot is the inescapability and necessity of experimentalism in ethics; “you do not know for sure what will bubble up when you become a guinea pig of your own complex... but a noble goal of both arts of the self and micropolitics... is to become somewhat other than ourselves, as we engage blockages in and between us” (Connolly 2017, 56-57). It is in this engagement, invitation – even – of these blockages that one prevents a speculative ethics crystallising into yet another universalising moment. The beckoning of the ‘incorporeal’ aspect to this ethics is crucial because it denotes that which is most vital to lively relations (and indeed, to life), and yet the register from which humans have trained themselves to assiduously ignore – passively or otherwise. At the risk of curtailing a more generous definition, the incorporeal can be understood as an immaterial ‘map’ of existence, one that unfolds and enfolds between sense, affect, space, time, expression, among other registers. It is a map insofar as the incorporeal propels, albeit in uncertain and immanent terms, an orientation that works between a virtual past and futurity. Its corporeal analogue matters just as much, but without an attentiveness to the ongoing culmination of the incorporeal, we will remain ethically adrift.

Thirdly, and finally, this ethics demands a reckoning with value. Too valuable to be left to the vicissitudes of capital, value is also too valuable to be left to morals! Taking a lead from Brian Massumi’s (2018) geometric rapprochement of value, ethics eschews content for expression such that it “bears on what, qualitatively, a process can do, and in what direction that capacitation leads” (Massumi 2018, 4). Put differently, ethics is not pursuant to a value system held in suspended animation, but is, instead, the reactivation of empathetic techniques of attendance to immanent modes of difference. The point of ethics is not to put a lid on difference, but to make difference all the more difficult to contain. For some, an insistent focus on value is not without risk; Tristan Garcia (2018, 128) argues the choice that lies before us is a tragic one, “either we let our lives be guided by the hope that thought can be

subjected to the values of life, or we let our lives be guided by the hope that life can be subjected to the values of thought”.

Framed thus, the choice is unreasonable. Notwithstanding the pitfalls of ‘hope’ as an affective disposition (Gerlach, 2016), ‘the values’ of life and thought are as indivisible as they are mutable. It is not a case of the subjection of one to another. Nor does speculative affirmation require the defenestration of evaluative concern. On this point Deleuze (2006, 174) remarks, “to affirm is still to evaluate, but to evaluate from the perspective of a will which enjoys its own difference in life instead of suffering the pains of the opposition to this life that it has itself inspired... to affirm is to unburden: not to load life with the weight of higher values, but to create new values which are those of life...”. To return to ethics is to return to the incessant generation of somatic, affective and intellectual capacities, governed not by obligation and its manifold indignities (Aurelius 2011, 111), but energised by the incompleteness of speculation. Ethics denotes the plane of existence: ‘capacity—power’.

Mired in the morass and redundancy of modern environmental politics enraptured to an earnest liberalism, ethics is practically a war cry.¹

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¹ An interpolation of Deleuze’s (1992, 255) paean to Spinoza’s ethical expressionism, namely, “[w]hen Spinoza says that we do not even know what a body can do, this is practically a war cry”..

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