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Poetic Objectivity
Toward an Ethics of Aliveness*

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Tell all the truth / but tell it slant (Emily Dickinson).

Summary. In this essay I will explore the possibility of an objective ecological ethics. To do this, I follow the embodied ethos of relationships: meaningful expression and mutual sharing occuring in living organisms and systems. Living beings on various levels of identity (cellular selves, individuals, and ecosystems) strive toward increased aliveness. They are self-healing, and generate meaningful relationships, all without the need or interference of human ethical thinking. Ecosystems tend toward complexity and organisms tend to avoid their own destruction. Both tendencies create "natural values" – values not extractable into abstraction, yet nonetheless fundamentally embodied in the actions of living beings and living systems. An ethics based on these principles (or insights) is inclusive in that it can be conceived as a sort of "poetic objectivity". Here the ethically good is the increase in "aliveness", which can be shared by other beings, and which is only possible as "being through the other". Aliveness is ineffable and cannot be extracted analytically. Hence it is objective only in a poetic sense that can be shared through participation. An ethics of poetic objectivity leaves room to negotiate individual relationships and narratives while providing goodness as an encompassing context tuning into the degree of sharing and mutual inspiration to be more alive. The natural values generated by sharing transformative relationships produce the whole of nature as an "ethical commons". Its principles can be instructive in reorganising human exchange on ethical and economical levels.

Zusammenfassung. In diesem Aufsatz erkunde ich, inwieweit eine objektive ökologische Ethik möglich ist. Dafür werde ich das verkörperte Ethos untersuchen, Beziehungen, Ausdruck und Praxis gegenseitigen Teilens in der Biosphäre. Organismen streben auf vielfältigen Ebenen ihrer Identität (zelluläre Selbste, Individuen und Ökosysteme) nach mehr Lebendigkeit. Sie bringen sich selbst hervor, heilen sich selbst und entwickeln produktive Beziehungen, ganz ohne Zutun menschlicher ethischer Erwägungen.

Ökosysteme tendieren dazu, über die Zeit komplexer zu werden, und Organismen versuchen ihre eigene Zerstörung zu vermeiden. Beide Tendenzen bringen einen Normhorizont hervor, etwas, das man als „natürliche Werte“ bezeichnen könnte. Diese Werte sind nirgendwo festgeschrieben und können nicht auf eine abstrakte Ebene extrahiert werden. Sie sind zutiefst in den Handlungen lebender Wesen und lebender Systeme verkörpert. Eine Ethik, die auf diesen Prinzipien und Einsichten beruht, schließt alle Wesen im Sinne einer „poetischen Objektivität“ ein. Sie zentriert das ethisch Gute in einem schwachen Sinn als „Lebendigkeit“, die von anderen Wesen geteilt werden kann. Eine Ethik der poetischen Objektivität gibt Raum, um Beziehungen und Lebenserzählungen zu verhandeln. Lebendigkeit ist ein Allmendeprozess. Die natürlichen Werte, die durch das Teilen von Beziehungen, die beide Seiten verwandeln, zustande kommen, bringen eine ethische Allmende hervor. Ein solches Denken kann auch den menschlichen Austausch auf ethischer, aber auch auf ökonomischer Ebene neu strukturieren.

1. Ethics in Thin Air

Ethics attempts to supply reasons for agents' conduct. One might also say that it tries to devise a productive behaviour for subjects. What does it mean to behave in the right way? What is the good life? What constitutes a just decision? Or as Kant might put it: What ought we to do? The use of the pronoun "we" points to us, the ethical subjects. Ethics is a process of reasoning for how ethical subjects should behave.

As far as environmental ethics is concerned, the two predominant methods pay tribute to this subject-centered approach: either environmental ethics favours a variant of the stewardship approach towards the environment and nature, in which humans remain the only possible ethical subjects; or environmental moral reasoning enlarges the title "ethical subject" to include parts of or all of nature, either by attributing human-like subject qualities to a few charismatic species (great apes, dolphins, crows, dogs, etc.), or by according intrinsic value to natural processes and individuals striving towards higher levels of being, e.g. more complexity (Light and Rolston 2002; Oelschlaeger 1991).

What a living subject actually i s , however, has not been made explicit in most ethical accounts (Varela 1997; Guattari 2000). Ethical reasoning, including environmental ethics, starts from an unclear idea of a subject. In other words, ethics is done without ontology. Or rather, these ethical systems do not openly name the ontology on which they build, instead remaining based on some hidden ontological preconditions. In the case of ethical theories which presume that only humans are subjects and hence ethical agents, these presumptions are clearly dualistic, and hence anchored in Enlightenment-tethered philosophy. Every ethics presumes an ontology, because moral statements are about agents' actions in a world, which can be shaped in a variety of ways. The first step proposed here, therefore, is

to engender a new ontology of the environment. This begins by imagining how we can best describe biological subjects and ecological relations.

Before we try to determine what an agent or a subject o u g h t to do, we need to know what a subject i s . For this, it is important to see how it comes about, how it is connected to other agents and to the remainder of the world. In brief, this means to understand how subjectivity is created, and which inherent constraints and should to be considered. Any ethical judgement about justice that does not consider the living agent and her true needs is profoundly totalitarian. It serves discipline, not connection. But connection is the endeavour of living beings. Controlling feelings and behaviour from an external position crucially overlook unfolding and exploring ethical desires from the inside of lived relationships and the lived self. Such an ethical stance from an external position is, therefore, paradoxically, profoundly unethical. It is, alas, the predominant approach of classical ethics, which is mostly devoted to humans and their goals from an external-rational, not from an embodied standpoint.

This ethical stance characterizes most reasoning about how to rightly treat the environment or other beings. Environmental ethics approaches ecosystems and other beings from the outside. What ethical reasoning lacks, however, is consideration of the embodied needs of beings in flesh and blood, including humans. Living beings' needs are related to their life process, and cannot be refashioned through convenient theories of justice. The only option is to acknowledge them, in their splendour and inconvenience, as they manifest. To ignore them through imposing circumscribed external ethical principles, enforces a grating mismatch, inexorably yielding pain and destruction. This context might explain our current situation of ecological enervation and the extinction of wild species in the face of a highly developed academic ethical theory. This ethical theory, however, predominantly is about the control of subjects by finding ethical rules they must adhere to in order to be considered rational subjects, not about the embodied practices and maxims created *sui generis* by the unfolding of subjecthoods through mutual transformations (for allied critiques see Bateson and Bateson 2004; Deleuze and Guattari 1972; Guattari 2000).

Before finalizing any thoughts about ethics, however, we need to consider the underlying ontology. To think the ontology of the environment means to think about what living beings are, as they create the sytem of ecological relationships and only through these realize their individuality. In environmental ethics, the idea of what an organism is, or an organic agent, or a subject, has not been discussed very widely. This is due to the astonishing fact that in the life sciences, but also in philosophy, there has been comparatively little discussion or research into the ontology of life, what living things do, and how living subjects come about, as Varela (1991) observes in a seminal text on what life is (see also Varela 1997; Weber and Varela 2002; Kull 2015; Weber 2016a and Weber 2016b).

Our ethical reasoning, then, must begin with an ontology of biological subjects. It must include, crucially, an understanding of how the biological

subject is related to the biological whole. It is my hypothesis that from an analysis of this relationship, we will automatically arrive at an environmental ethics. Such an ethics will construe what is right for the ethical agent in terms of what is right for the system(s) to which the agent is connected.

This inherent connectivity holds potential because the underlying system is a necessary condition which allows for the agent's existence, and elicits the agents protection by virtue of her intent to survive and prosper. Here we can define an agent as a function of the self-differentiation of a larger whole. This relation of self-differentiation, begetting the role the individual plays in and for the larger whole, is foundational for a systems approach to ethical thinking.

We can therefore conclude that an ontology of embodied agents necessarily yields an environmental ethics. This ethics is based on the way individuals are emmeshed in order to produce a common good, the ecosystem. The principles according to which productive ecological relationships in an ecological whole are created, which lead to the self-realization of individuals and the productive dynamics of the whole, can thus be considered as an embodied ecological ethics. The ethics i s the ecosystem.

2. From Self-Construction to Subject

To understand what an organic subject is, we need to observe what an organism actually does to maintain its livelihood. For quite a while, organisms have been viewed mainly as organic machines executing genetic orders or following causal-mechanic trajectories. If we take a different angle, however, we can instead view them as autopoietic processes – as entities whose activity consists in Autopoiesis, the material construction of their embod selves (Maturana and Varela 1980; Varela 1997; Weber and Varela 2002).

Varela (1997) defines an organism – and hence life – as a "process of creation of an identity". Organisms bring forth an identity as a material process: the observable telos of metabolism is to perpetuate itself. As I have mentioned elsewhere,

> [a] thing lives through the process of maintaining itself continuously as a whole. It strives to regenerate, grow and maintain its boundaries against internal fluctuations and external disturbances. Put in a more radical way: life is not a cascade of causal reactions, but rather its opposite – autonomy (Weber 2016a: 53).

A living entity produces itself and all of its components autonomously. It is distinguished by the ability to retain its integrity in the face of changes in its environment. It generates the structure as well as the border of its surroundings. The whole organic machinery has one primary goal: it produces exactly the components that have produced it. Ribosomes enable proteins to be formed that become ribosomes. Cell membranes which are brought

forth by the cell interior shelter the cell interior to produce membrane components, and so forth (Weber and Varela 2002).

Each single cell is a "process of creation of an identity" (Varela 1997). The most simple organism must be understood as a material system enacting the intention and the activity to maintain itself intact, to grow, to unfold, and to produce a fuller scope of life for itself. A cell is a process that generates the components necessary to maintain their ongoing production – while the materials, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, and silicon flow through it.

Ninety-nine percent of a cell's activity is devoted to its own maintenance. This observation obtains for single cells and multicellular life forms. A high degree of self-relatedness also holds for higher levels of more complex organisms. In vertebrates, the bulk of neuronal activities have nothing to do with external stimuli but instead exhibits a creative and imaginary concern of self with self (Varela et al. 1991).

It is important to see that the living entity exists as a self-identical structure in space and time, although at no moment is it materially identical with itself; matter passes through its changing spatial arrangements. Only the fact of being alive keeps this circuit closed. When an organism dies, the process comes to an end, and the components behave as normal chemical compounds tending to assume the highest possible degree of entropy: they decay.

The organization of that which lives is therefore characterized by the conjunction of two different ontological realms. Unshaped matter and the process of regulation together make up the reality of the organism. The process of living takes place in normal matter, except that life is organized in such a way that matter takes up autopoietic behaviours. The living cell governs the atoms of which it is built. Subjectivity must be viewed as a bodily, material process. It is not a miracle fallen from above, nor exclusively divine, nor a rational power only humans possess. Subjectivity cannot exist without bodies. Without the flesh of a living cell or a multitude of them, subjectivity is unthinkable; it is deeply entangled with matter.

Therefore, subjectivity is an empirical phenomenon. The empirical objectivity that is so familiar to contemporary science can thus be enlarged by an "empirical subjectivity" – a condition of feeling and experiencing shared among all living beings (Weber 2016b). Instead of separating the world into the lifeless objectivity of matter and the arbitrary subjectivity of the unrestricted human mind that is free to choose whatever it wishes, as the common scientific approach has done, we need to recognize that subjectivity is not free and unrestricted, as it is coupled to the rules through which it emerges as a body. It is empirical, as an embodied subject also is an empirical reality. It is intrinsic to lifemaking, as is skin or membrane.

An embodied subject is a process enacting momentary solutions for an underlying duality or disparateness which exists between the form (the process of identity proper) of a living being and the matter passing through it. An embodied subject follows a tendency in complex biochemistry to bring forth material systems that auto-create themselves. A living being therefo-

re is not a neutral process, but follows a logic of success (or failure) built into the very structure of its functioning.

But we must observe that the process of creating one's self as a subject is highly problematic. Subjects are not substances, unchangeable chunks of reality that once set into being remain more or less unchanged. They are also not timeless instructions or algorithms, like genes. A subject is a highly problematic process, an ongoing attempt of a positive union of an underlying separateness, a string of proposals to negotiate, integrate, and imagine, that only result for each fleeting moment in making the presence of that which we perceive as subject possible.

Because subjectivity is nothing substantive, but rather a process that can be achieved to a certain degree, the subject as such already has a built-in horizon of success. It can unfold, or it can be blocked. To take Varela's example, a bacterium, a single cell, can successfully incorporate the sugar in its suspension medium, or it can fail. What is good for an embodied subject in a community of other such subjects?

The roots of ethical reasoning do not start with ethical agents, rational subjects like humans consider themselves to be, but with the self-creation of subjects. The self-creation of subjects is a process mediating between two poles, and hence demands a negotiation of how a productive relationship is possible between the side of self and the side of other, although these sides are only defined (and continously redefined) through the process. This process joins together formerly independent standpoints, isometric parts quivering at opposite polarities. There is no such thing as an ethical subject from the beginning, as all subjects are basically intersubjects, processes of creation oscillating between designated self and designated other.

If we can describe what supports the construction of subjects on the level of their embodied self-realization, this can provide a necessary foundation to build a theory describing salutary processes between different subjects. After we have accepted that the subject-making process has ethical relevance, we need now observe how biological agents bring forth value through their life-making.

3. Values as Natural Facts

Every living being interprets the world according to its needs and desire to persist and prosper. The world thus gains, in the same movement by which self and other are divided, existential significance for the emerging self. A "perturbation", in autopoietic terms, is a stimulus that interferes with the organism from the outside, causing it to react in a way that is determined only by its inner processes and states.

When organisms are conceived as autopoietic systems, their fundamental dimension of existence is in relation to meaning. A living being's presence imbues meaning to surrounding things by transforming them into the

stage on which it plays out its existential drama. And through this sense, all things gain their existential role: their role for the organism becomes part of the organism's reality regarding its experience of prosperity or defeat, stability or chaos – precisely because the organism has to "master the things", they m e a n something to the organism and do not c a u s e a behaviour directly.

Embodied subjects never encounter "neutral" things or stimuli or information, but instead every encounter presents valences of significance ranging on a gradient from advantageous (or felicitious) to disadvantageous (infelicitous) for the experiencing subject. In the beginning, perception designates no names, except the existential feeling of helpful or harmful. So in a way, we could say that e m o t i o n is the first unfolding of the world. Perhaps an emotional background offers the deepest underlying structure of all concepts. The first fission of the world, the first discontinuity in the homogenous equilibrium of eternity, has no form and no structure; it is nothing but the amorphous cry of highest urgency uttered by the organism: life-giving or life-destroying, good or bad.

The background against which an organism brings forth meaning is always existential. For the autopoietic system is always concerned with its self-regulation, and only via this self-regulation does it keep the onset of decay at bay. Meaning arises out of this dependent independence: the living system is not causally determined by its surroundings but nevertheless cannot exist for a moment without it. Because the living being has to keep a distance from some matter, this creates a conundrum for it, for it precisely i s matter.

The perspective of a threatened and thus affirmation-dependent organism lays a new grid over the world: a ubiquitous scale of value. Everything life interacts with gains through the pragmatics of the interaction a value related to the amount it makes possible the continuity of existence. Because from the beginning it has an interest in itself, the organism's active self-confirmation through interacting with its surrounding matter confers a significance and place for that matter (Jonas 1973).

From this perspective arises the colourful ontological universe we experience. This is only possible from the perspective of a fragile being that is always threatened by its own destruction and thus invents ever-higher levels of integration. The world's stage without living agents would be a completely neutral place. Only after life has come into it, is the world real in prospering and pain, joy and misery. Only life is interested in its life as a continuity. Through this interest emerges "absolute value" (Jonas 1973) upon the stage. This a b s o l u t e m e a n i n g then is the only reliable constant in an organism's life.

Organic subjectivity therefore creates an ethical stance as part of its self-creation process. The world created by the autopoietic self is deep with value. The logic of the living has a living ethics. What is disruptive or degenerative for the organism is perceived as bad, and what gives it means to prosper is becomes its good. These subjective perceptions manifest as

experiences of existential values within the "Core Self" (Panksepp 2005) which navigates the impacts of these experiences (Weber 2016). The Core Self is these experiences. As Jonas (1973) put it: being an organism means to create the "Urwert", the primordial value on which all experienced values are based: the wish to be alive. Living existence at its base essentially i s ethics. Ethics is the flip side of existence.

4. Self as Other

So far we have only looked at the self-creation of the subject. What about the other, the primal locus of ethical concern? We have seen that the self-construction of a subject is a highly precarious process involving the enmeshment of two different domains, a self-creating form on the one hand, and the tendency of matter to dissipate in order to assume the lowest possible energy. The self-construction of a subject therefore is a process built on contradiction (Michelini 2012; Kull 2015; Weber 2016b). "Other" is already implied in "self".

If we loosen our focus on single embodied agents and look at subjects among other subjects, the situation remains the same. Being-in-a-world is about the embodied construction of self on and from others on different levels of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. The individual Self is nothing substantial, but always transformed through an encounter. Self is dependent on the other (Thompson 2007; De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007; Di Paolo and Thompson 2014; De Jaegher 2015). An ethics can only be built on an analysis of how this relation of mutual creation can succeed. An environmental ethics therefore needs to take into account how a multitude of subjects together creates the conditions that make the existence of subjectivity possible.

Varela in his 1991 book, *The Embodied Mind*, together with philosopher Evan Thompson and cognition researcher Eleanor Rosch proposed a position called "Enactivism", which slowly gained traction and in recent years has matured to a mainstream approach in cognitive science, relegating representational and computational views somewhat to the past. Varela was fond of using the expression "middle ground" for the ensuing position, which is a wording from Varela's Buddhist background and which I understand here thus: reality is neither bland illusion, nor brute fact, but poetic transformation.

The core concept of the *Embodied Mind* thesis *sensu* Varela et al. is "reciprocal specification" (Varela et al. 1991). World and agent are mutually specifying one another. The agent "enacts" a version of herself which is about the world, which is connected to reality, but in a subjective way. Reality is always accessible, but it is so only by being interpreted, put on the stage of subjective dramas, re-invented. This is not an act of absolute authorship, but a co-invention together with others and the whole world.

Varela et al. (1991) derive their idea of "reciprocal specification" partly from research in psychological categorization (Rosch 1978). Their argu-

ment is reminiscent of the position held by the most prominent historical representative of embodied phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty (1964). By stressing the common birth of phenomenal world and subjective standpoint in perception, Varela et al. (1991) try to overcome the danger of solipsism which every strong constructivist, and to some extent, also a biosemiotic position can possibly be subject to (as in Jakob von Uexküll's (1980) impenetrable *Umwelt* "bubbles" which surround every organism). The common genesis of world and living agent provides the key for understanding the way organisms so remarkably fit into their environment, and why communication at all is possible.

Enaction means that reality is always in the making. It is not here nor there but at any time in between, freshly created. This forecloses any final objectivity. As any contact is transformation, no pure "as such" is findable. The sphere in which mutual reciprocity yields perception, in which poetic expression is not an arbitrary judgement by an individualistic mind but the objective imagination of reality, has been described by Merleau-Ponty (1964) as the "flesh of the world".

The "flesh of the world" is not identical with the physiological tissue of the living body, but it is also nothing without it. It is the sphere of existential reciprocity which brings forth living reality. It is characterized by the fact that experience is never "about" something, but always happening between one being and another through a mutual transformation. Only according to the degree to which the experience is shared by both can it be real. Only to the degree that it involves an actual transformation, does it exist. What we conventionally see as a matter of touch or vision alone – a world "given" to our senses, the test tube environment "given" to a bacterial cell, a thing sitting before our eyes or a sound coming to our ears – is a matter of reciprocity, of mutual creation, which makes both partners more real.

Merleau-Ponty (1964) calls the ensuing mutuality, in which perceiver and perceived become entangled, "chiasm". Only through chiasm, in the middle of both, is there reality. This participation, however, is assumed by feeling bodies. The "flesh of the world" to some degree is the flesh of the body, but it can also be there in verbal caresses which stir the soul as a soft wind stirs the fine hairs on the skin.

The knowledge body of ecology is a proof for the middle ground, the chiasmic interdependency of all subjects and things as well. Its paradigm is hypercomplexity, the entanglement of everything with everything. Here we have real interdependencies which make possible the diversity of its middle ground. The species diversity of, say, a red sea coral reef, which awaits full explanation in terms of the neo-Darwinian paradigm, is only possible as a network of infinite interactions. If we cut this network and remove some of its parts, it will change as a whole.

The evolution of individual species, a snail feeding on algae for instance, cannot be explained by the outcome of external factors alone but only as a feature of the gestalt of the whole evolving reef. We see here clearly that a phenomenon, an embodied reality in space and time, is only possible

through the interaction of innumerable forces and fates. We have not only one level of meaning, but also an example of the reality of "flesh": in the case of the coral reef, the most delicate organic layer that covers the stone of the coral heads.

The level on which self experiences itself as through the other is the sphere of meaning in which other is existentially relevant to self. Other is processed or transformed in terms of self. It appears as meaning for the own self. This meaning is "inside" the body, as inwardness, or core self, and cannot be separated from it. In this sense, subjectivity-as-interbeing is also always self-as-world. In being itself, as through-other, a subject is the world, as through-self. Summing up these steps:

1. Subjectivity is always intersubjectivity.
2. Subjectivity / Intersubjectivity is always embodied.
3. Intersubjectivity is not o n l y body. It happens in a poetic space, transcending body, while including it, but from the perspective of its existential imaginary dimension.

5. "To live in Truth": Ethics as Commons

Maybe the most important aspect of subjectivity, which interlaces with its other qualities, is that it is shared. It is connected to body, and body is something we share with all other living beings. Subjectivity therefore is not private, at least not fully. It has an entirely individual aspect, as my body is only mine, and its characteristics and quirks only belong to me. But, as the bodies of all biological species are deeply similar and intimately related through a common natural history, subjectivity is a faculty common among all beings. It is what binds us together.

In sharing subjectivity, we truly become subjects. The world that results from this mutual partaking in different empirical subjectivities is our common objective reality. As I explored more in depth in my book *The Biology of Wonder* (Weber 2016a):

> The ethics we need to look for in the realm of living things, therefore, cannot be a set of abstract principles. It must be a practice of realizing oneself through connection with others, who are also free to realize themselves. Gary Snyder (1990) calls this a 'practice of the wild'. If we look to the ways other cultures have tried to become a creative part of ecosystems, hence to actually practice the wild, we can observe that the form in which they do this is what we would call a 'commons'. The other beings are not an outside nor a resource. They share a common productive and poetic reality.
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> Historically, we understand by 'commons' an economic system in which various participants use the same resource and follow particular rules in order to not overexploit it (Bollier 2014). If we look deeper into actual commons principles, we can see that traditional commoners do not distinguish between the resource they protect and

> themselves, as users of the resource. The members of a commons are not conceptually detached from the space they are acting in. The commons and the commoners are the same. This is basically the situation in an ecosystem (Weber 2015).
> The idea of the commons thus provides a unifying principle that dissolves the supposed opposition between facts and rules. It cancels the separation of the ecological and the social. In any existence that commits itself to the commons, the task we must face is to realize the well-being of the individual while not risking a decrease of the surrounding and encompassing whole. If nature actually is a commons, it follows that the only possible way to formulate a working ecological ethics – which inserts the human right in the middle of nature and at the same time allows for freedom of self-expression and technological invention – will be an ecology of the commons (Weber 2016a: 353).

Agency is always enfolded within a living system. Because of the ways agency comes about – mingling self-assertion as a positive value and other-relation as another positive value (contradicting one another) – an organism is both sovereign and interdependent at the same time. Also in the commons, its members do not hold arbitrary sway as rulers but play their roles as attentive subjects through a network of relationships. All consequences of their interactions reflect back on those who are acting. And not only humans are agents, but all other subjects – bats, fungi, bacteria, aesthetic obsessions, infections or guiding concepts – are equally active. A commons thus can be described as a rhizome – a material network of living, incarnate in meaningful connections, which constantly transforms itself as it mutates and evolves.

The innermost core of aliveness cannot be controlled by a rationality which comes from outside. It cannot be controlled, but only conceived, through being involved in experiences and creative expressions. Every commons is always an embodied, material, perceptible, existential and symbolic negotiation of individual existence through the other and the whole. It is always creating an inside sphere of meaning, a living reality from which its members unfold. Commons are spaces of feeling, and therefore origins of value. If humans create commons, then at best these are attempts to echo the forms of order implied in the self-creating wild through acts of creative transformation in response to the existential imperatives of the wild. It is this stance of negotiating, adapting and enduring that has determined the way in which humans have dealt with the more-than-human world since time immemorial.

An objective ecological ethics therefore is possible. It is not only possible but it is the only way an ethics can be conceived that does not exclude the majority of subjects in the biosphere and with them certain dimensions of ourselves – those dimensions which are the most profound ones, and even the defining ones of our existence as embodied subjects-in-transformation. An ethics which is not meant to sever this dimension from ourselves, and hence destroy itself in us and in the world, needs to be objective. It needs to be an ethics as the art of living relationships, which make the whole grow through the growth of its particulars.

When I speak of objectivity, I do not conceive it in the strong binding way as maybe Christian ethics considers itself to be objective. Objectivity means that ethical "decisions" can be understood as processes of subject-construction in the web of an ecosystem of mutually interrelated life processes. Such decisions are objective because the conditions of subject-construction are not arbitrary. They are shared by all beings which have sensible and fragile bodies. But as this objectivity comes about not by external laws, but through the prospering of its actual realization in a commons of metabolic and material relationships, it is weak. It can be understood by sharing, by flowering, by creating, but it is difficult to pin down in general rules which are applicable for all cases in an abstract way. Aliveness is an embodied commons.

The ethical objectivity I speak of can be imagined through a situation, within an individual body, and together with others. It is enacted, like a poem is enacted, composed and imagined on vaguely shared feeling and transmitted through contagion. This kind of ecosystemic ethics follows "poetic objectivity" (Weber 2013; 2016a and 2016b). We could also say that poetic objectivity always yields its objective ethics. It is intricate to bodies and their mixes and interpenetrations. It is in the flesh. As I have elaborated elsewhere (Weber 2016a):

> An ecosystem through its shape as commons does not only integrate agents and the whole, comprised of such agents. Its reality is at the same time material and structural, experienced and created. It, therefore, combines subjective and objective perspectives. Emotional experience is not alien to the conception of an ecological commons but central to it. In an ethics of mutual ecological transformation, feeling is a central part. As inwardness is the necessary way bodies experience themselves, feeling is also a crucial component of an ecological ethics. It is not an add-on that might be tolerated; it is inextricably linked to the reality of ecological functioning. It is the value of flourishing life shining forth in the experiences of those who live it together. If a living being participates in exchange processes of an ecosystem, it also gets emotionally involved. This emotional dimension is how living beings experience the relevance of their connections, the meaning of how others reciprocate, and how the whole setting acts on their self-productive process. To be connected, to be in metabolism, is always an existential engagement, and this echoes as feeling. Feeling is, so to speak, the core self of a commons ethic. It symbolizes how well the mutual realization of individuality and the whole are achieved.
>
> Our capability as living beings to inwardly experience the existential meaning of outward relationships gives us the means of emotional ethical evaluation. We always unconsciously assess the degree to which an ecosystem, or any relational structure we are involved with, is able to grant us the freedom to be and to be in connection. This evaluation is part of the process of living and hence of relating. Inwardly, this is the feeling of being alive, the experienced aliveness. Feeling alive or 'enlivened' is, therefore, an immediate way to experience whether a set of relationships is healthy or not. We could also call it the experience of beauty. It is an experience that connects the perspectives of first and third person, the observation and the felt meaning (Weber 2016a: 355–356).

Productive ethical behaviour transforms first-person perspectives through second-person ones, and through this, changes the whole. This ethically good is felt as “aliveness”, which can be shared by other beings, and describable as “being through the other”. Aliveness is not outspoken, nor can it be extracted analytically. Hence it is objective only in a poetic sense that can be shared through participation. Poetic objectivity is shared objectivity through mutual transformation and reciprocal specification in the generation of meaningful ecological integration.

Therefore, “where there is much life, there is the potential for great beauty”, as American environmental philosopher Sandra Lubarsky (2014) observes:

> [Beauty] is not a quality – blue or shiny or well-proportioned or a composite of these – overlaid on a substance. It is not owned by the world of art or fashion or cosmetics. […] It is embedded in life, part of the dynamic, relational structure of the world created by the concert of living beings. And it is what we name those relational structures that encourage freshness and zest so that life can continue to make life. […] Life, wilderness, biodiversity, and beauty are an interlaced knot; when the cord is cut, the intricacies are lost, the entire weave undone (Lubarsky 2014: 194–195).

By the experience of beauty we are able to evaluate the life-giving potential of a situation or an ecosystem. Beauty, therefore, as a sign of an enlivening situation, is itself giving life. Any aesthetic experience of nature thus is to some degree an ethical assessment. Ugliness, on the other hand, has a certain degree of toxicity. The functional desert of contemporary agricultural landscapes with its few species leaves us uninterested, whereas a flowering dry slope with its rose bushes and nightingales softens our heart. Rainforest and coral reefs fascinate us, the endless pine steppes of an industrial forest, less so.

In the world of living beings, the beautiful system most often is the diverse system, and the diverse system is the good system because life through each individual desires itself as the greatest possible plenitude. Still, the beauty of natural systems never appears in a radiant triumph of final victory. Ecological stability and the beauty of life are built on the dialectics of birth and death. Life’s existence is fragile to the core. Its beauty, to which we are free to contribute at any moment, is the hope for healing. This hope is its objectivity.

Beauty is the sense of our own participation in an ethical process of mutual realisation. It can guide us through the different negotiations of the commoning process, whether this be the need to provide for food, to care for a watershed, or to build a loving relationship. In an objective ethics of ecosystems (and of relationships as ecosystems, and of ecosystems as relations) beauty-through-negotiation substitutes the philosopher’s ethical assessment or the rather inflexible ethical rules and social customs which overcrust history.

To live ethically can be felt through participation, through the degree to which this experience of participation is also the experience of self-realization. To be ethical then is not different from being real, as David Abram (1997: 264) points to, when he suggests that, "a human community that lives in a mutual beneficial relation with the surrounding earth is a community, we might say, that lives in truth".

Notes

* Some thoughts in this essay have been explored elsewhere in Weber (2013, 2015 2016a and 2016b).

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