Aesthethics: The Art of Ecological Responsibility

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I. Opening

The ecological crisis is one of the most critical moral concerns of the present. But the concern is not with the *environment,* or with that which surrounds us; it is not with an objectified nature, in relation to which humans stand as mere passive observers. Rather, *ecological* concern emerges from recognition that humanity *participates* in nature, that our behavior in the natural world affects our own present and future as well as the present and future of the biosphere and that we are morally answerable for this behavior, or *responsible* in, through, and for our *participation*.[1] Understood in these ways, the ecological crisis can be viewed as an unfolding historical process generated by the structural forms and systemic values of human cultural life. Adequate response to the ecological crisis thus calls upon us to reimagine our moral responsibilities within nature.

What does it mean to claim this, and what on earth could be the roles of the arts and of religious life in response? In this brief reflective article, I will engage this question by thinking through the ways in which the ecological crisis calls upon us *to enlarge our moral imaginations and to enact moral creativity*. The task is to reflect upon ways in which ecological responsibility can be understood as an *aesthethical* practice.

The article is divided into three parts: 1) reflection on the relations between the true, the good, and the beautiful (I will be brief); 2) a discussion of connections between symbolism and responsibility; 3) and thoughts on the roles of the arts and religion in reimagining and creatively manifesting ecological responsibility.

II. True, Good, Beautiful

According to the dominant philosophical tradition in the modern West, claims to truth are justified insofar as they correspond to the way things are, and judg-

1. For fuller treatment of the concept of "responsible participation" as a metaphor of ecotheological ethics, see Michael S. Hogue, *The Tangled Bank: Towards an Ecotheological Ethics of Responsible Participation,* Princeton Theological Monographs, (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick 2008).

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ments about the good are in some way derivative from this correspondence. This moral realism, couched within a correspondence theory of truth, parallels traditions of aesthetic realism according to which the metric of aesthetic value is verisimilitude, or likeness to reality. But in explaining his approach to knowledge and morals, the American pragmatist William James once wrote that he understood *truth to be a species of good*. This view of the *good as a species of truth* is a reversal of the dominant modern view just described.

According to James and other pragmatists, knowing is something much more than adjudicating the correspondence of knowledge claims to reality. James's counterposition is that knowing is a practical, morally engaged, value-laden and value-constitutive craft, the craft of getting into right relationship with the world. The true is contingent on the good insofar as the moral life is a project of discerning how we ought or should be in a world that we cocreate through our engaging discernment of it. On this account, the moral agent is both a creature and a creator of the moral world. Instead of viewing the work of knowledge as the endeavor to discover *correspondences,* knowledge work becomes the discovery and enactment of an ultimately moral *commerce* between knowers and the world.

And yet, if truth is a species of good, is the good the self-sufficient principle around which everything else swings; or, is the good itself a species of something else? It would be foolish to attempt to trace the philosophical genealogy of this question in this short article, let alone to attempt to answer it. But I will nonetheless briefly explore the idea that while truth may be a species of the good, the good may be a species of the beautiful. According to such an idea, contemplation of and interaction with beauty—whether manifest in its crafted aesthetic forms, or in the natural world, or in the play of human sociality—becomes a field of moral practice. Beauty trains the moral imagination. As John Dewey famously put this, "Change in the climate of the imagination is the precursor of the changes that affect more than the details of life."[2] The limits of imagination are the limits of moral possibility.

Let me offer a brief illustration from my own life. I grew up in northern Michigan, between the pinky and ring fingers, a land pockmarked with lakes and streams. I spent a great deal of time on the water and many hours getting lost and found in the woods. The world of nature was a playground, an animated place, but nonetheless a place I valued primarily as a recreational resource. But I can also remember a time when I was sitting on the beach with one of my friends. We were out at the end of the Old Mission peninsula, an old gnarled finger of land pointing into Lake Michigan. It was an overcast

2. John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Penguin, 2005), 346.

day. We were sitting and talking and looking out across the water. I began to notice that the horizon looked a bit strange, blurred like it was behind some gauze. The line between the distant water and sky was no longer very crisp. Instead, it looked smudged, the way a dark pencil line looks after you have tried to erase it. Even more oddly, this smudgy horizon was creeping closer. Soon it wasn't a gauzy, smudged line in the distance, but a veil hanging from the sky. The sky and the water were fusing together and were now on their feet facing me and coming closer. I was utterly perplexed, totally intrigued, and a little beside myself. And then I was wet . . . because it was raining.

Have you ever seen the rain come in across a lake? It can take the wind out of you. It can be slow and quiet, or sudden and crashing. On that afternoon, the rain meandered gently across the lake, feeling its way silently. I had never experienced beauty like that, beauty that encountered me, rather than beauty that I encountered. Beauty was not in the water or in the sky or on the beach, it *was not in a thing,* but *happened* as an event. I could not put my mind around it at the time. I did not even know what was happening until I was soaking with it. What I thought was just a beachside waterscape, background to conversation, had come to life and greeted me in its own wet summertime syllables.

I cannot say that this experience was *the* one that changed the way I thought and felt about the value of nature, but it is at least *one* of the experiences that did. It was an experience of nature's value through nature's beauty, of a goodness of nature beyond explanation, one that, in this case, quite literally erased my ordinary perceptual categories. I also cannot say that my behavior toward the natural world suddenly changed as a result of this particular event. But nevertheless, here I am now, pointing back to this experience of beauty as one of the events that brought my ecological conscience to life. My respect for the moral sense of nature was seeded by aesthetic experience.

French philosopher Simone Weil was aware of these connections between aesthetics and morality when she wrote that, "The beauty of the world is not an attribute of matter in itself. It is a relationship of the world to our sensibility. . . ."[3] This relationship is an extraordinary one, for unlike many others, according to Weil, "A beautiful thing involves no good except itself. . . . We are drawn toward it without knowing what to ask of it. It offers us its own existence. . . . Only beauty is not the means to anything else."[4] The significance of Weil's suggestion is not only that beauty can tutor the moral imagination, but that it informs the possibility of recognizing and affirming the intrinsically

3. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (1951; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 164.

4. Ibid., 166–67.

good, of witnessing to and engaging the recalcitrant depth of value in the relation between humans and the world.

This shift in moral perception described by Weil helps to explain what happened to me on the Old Mission Peninsula years ago. I began then to perceive nature as more than a backdrop to my life, harboring value beyond recreational utility. Nature confronted me then, and sometimes still does, as both a generative theater and a creative author of the densely textured *aesthethical* drama of life. As a result, my sense of my participation within and responsibilities toward nature, or of "the relation of the world to my sensibility," was and still is being transformed.

Our aspirations to the good and right life, our commitments to doing and being good, our hopes of living in the world in right relation—these aspirations, commitments, and hopes have an aesthetic character and are informed by interaction with beauty. Through the pursuit of knowledge, and in the moral life, we participate in the creation of the world, and through these participative creative acts, our moral sensibilities toward the world emerge. It is not that we bring the physical world into existence, of course. But in communities and through our traditions, questing for knowledge and holiness, willing power and wickedness, speaking truth and deceiving, in these and so many other ways we create the images and stories and symbols that craft the moral worlds within which we live, move, and breathe.

This means that the moral life includes the disciplines of the artist who seeks not so much verisimilitude, not just to get things right, but creatively to express things well with one's whole life. In the moral life, this kind of creative expression includes the strenuous practice of embodying moral values and principles that are rarely easy to enact. In such a view, the moral life becomes an artistic project, the representative crafting of a creative "commerce" between the world we perceive and hope for and the selves we are and aspire to become.

As moral artists in the present, we face a monumental moral challenge—the ecological crisis, which calls for *aesthethically* innovative and tradition-bending moral artistry. Global climate change, the loss of biodiversity, the salinization of soils and the acidification of oceans—listing these things trivializes their moral monstrosity. Because the realities of the ecological crisis are of such manifest significance, one of the imperatives of our time is to reinvest the ways we give expression to them with the more urgent moral meanings and purposes that will provoke more radical response. The moral worlds we render as moral artists need to be sufficient to the crisis we face. Fortunately, the imperative to imagine differently and better is one to which many activists, thinkers, and artists have responded.

III. Responsibility

One philosopher who embraced this imperative was the German Jewish émigré, Hans Jonas. Jonas wrote many books and essays during his career, had much to do with the early formation of green politics in Europe, and taught for years on the philosophy faculty at the New School for Social Research. Not long before his death, Jonas presented a talk in Italy on the occasion of receiving an award for his book, *The Imperative of Responsibility*. The award's sponsor had asked him to reflect on the topic of racism. As a German Jew who had abandoned an academic career in his homeland in order to fight against the Nazi's, as a son whose mother was murdered at Auschwitz, he was well qualified to lecture on this topic. Jonas began by sharing a brief and moving story recalling an encounter he had had with two Jewish women in Italy at the end of the war, in the very city of Udine where he was now receiving his award. However, in concluding this story and despite the requested subject matter of the lecture, Jonas declared the problem of racism to be "anachronistic, irrelevant, almost farcical before the all-encompassing challenge which an endangered global environment flings in the face of all mankind."[5]

Jonas argued that the challenge of a planet endangered by reckless human power relativizes all other moral, political, and religious concerns. While many of these other concerns divide us, planetary peril forces upon us all a radical sense of solidarity. Under the pressure of global ecological catastrophe, humanity is one and not many. Of ecological holocaust, each of us is, to some degree, both a victim and perpetrator. Each of us and all of us together are simultaneously subject and object of a crisis that transfigures all of our other moral challenges. Jonas prophetically announced his appraisal of ecological endangerment in his final documented public comments with these indelible words:

> It was once religion which told us that we are all sinners, because of original sin. It is now the ecology of our planet which pronounces us all to be sinners because of the excessive exploits of human inventiveness. It was once religion which threatened us with a last judgment at the end of days. It is now our tortured planet which predicts the arrival of such a day without any heavenly intervention. The latest revelation—from no Mount Sinai, from no Mount of the Sermon, from no Bo (tree of Buddha)—is the outcry of mute things . . . that we must heed by curbing our powers over creation, lest we perish together on a wasteland of what was creation.[6]

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5. Hans Jonas, "Epilogue: The Outcry of Mute Things," *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz,* ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 201.

6. Ibid., 201–202 (italics mine).

"The outcry of mute things"—this is a powerful expression of the stakes and the task of the ecological crisis. It has haunted me for years. And its relation to the topic of this article is profound. For in his comments Jonas ties the ecological crisis to a problem with human moral perception, a problem that he suggests is related to some of our traditional religious moral frameworks and habits of thinking. The issue, for Jonas, is that the ecological crisis produced by the "excessive exploits of [modern] human inventiveness" radically exceeds the historical conventions of religious and philosophical morality. Human creativity has catapulted us into a moral frontier within which we must find our moral way without the aid of historical moral precedent. The ecological crisis is an *ethical novum,* a novel moral condition whose threat calls us to learn to hear the shrill revelatory silence of "mute things." Response to this call depends upon recreation of the moral art of responsibility.

Jonas gave his life to this recreative task. One way to interpret his work is as an integrative *aesthethic* transcendence of two dominant philosophical approaches to morality in the modern West, the moral rationalism of Kant and the ethical emotivism of Hume. While for Kant, moral duty emerges as an obligation of rational freedom, and while for Hume morality derives from our habituated affective dispositions, the imperatives of human responsibility for Jonas manifest through an *aesthethical* synthesis of human reason, freedom, and feeling.

I refer to this synthesis as *aesthethic* because of the ways it joins questions about judgment and perception and symbolism. Moral judgment and moral perception are symbolically mediated in the condition of the moral person as one whose agency emerges from and is enacted through the integrity of thought, sense, and feeling in a world dense with value. This dynamic is similar to the relationship between an artist's perceptive representation of some art object and the art critic's judgments of aesthetic value. As the artist represents an object, event, or moment in the world by bringing to bear her artistic skills within a given aesthetic medium, and in some relation to the historical conventions of that medium, similarly, the moral agent brings to bear historically and existentially formed moral capacities in order to perceive the salient dimensions of some moral situation. As the art critic evaluates the aesthetic significance of art objects, again in the light of historically learned and existentially embodied skills of critical judgment, similarly, the moral agent applies skills of judgment in the evaluation of moral action and character. The relation between the production and critical judgment of art, on the one hand, and moral perception and evaluation on the other, is not simply a relation of structural similarity for Jonas. For of signal importance for Jonas is the motivational and regulative function he grants to cultural symbolism.

According to Jonas, the phenomenon of freedom upon which moral responsibility depends originates primordially in organic metabolic processes, but reaches its pinnacle in the emergent nature of human beings. While all living beings in some way purposively affirm their existence metabolically, [insofar as physiologically they affirm being against nonbeing], this purposiveness reaches a conscious crescendo in the uniquely mediated character of human existence. Humans metabolize like all other organisms, and are mobile, perceiving, and feeling, as with all other animals. But humans also create and use tools that are themselves worked upon and made available for future work, and thus gain a distinct capacity for manipulating their world on a magnitude unknown to other forms of life.

Further, humans produce images and inhabit in addition to the world of nature a second, constructed, symbolic world. Though imaginatively constructed, this world of symbols and images engages the world of nature insofar as what is imagined emerges from, acts upon, conditions, and can reshape human perception of and activity in the natural world. By way of the world mediation brought about through the combinations of tool use and image making, human power is exponentially increased and qualitatively different from the powers of other forms of animal life.

In addition, humans are conscious of mortality in unique ways, as evidenced by practices of memorializing life and by creating graves and rituals of death. *Memento mori,* or the remembrance of death, is in some way built into reflective human life. Consciousness of mortality leads to a further mediation, moral self-mediation, through which the existent self comes to stand in relation to a normative self-image, a view of the self not merely as what it is but as what it would like to become. This is in part what Socrates meant by saying that philosophy is learning to die. Death awareness brings human life to focus as a precarious moral project. Though all forms of life exist on a continuum of mediated world relations, humans exist in uniquely morally self-mediated ways. Moral self-mediation is the furthest expanse of freedom's horizon. Through moral self-mediation, humans are able not only to work upon and imaginatively to project the world symbolically, but also to imagine and symbolically project themselves as they hope or aspire to become. Humans therefore become multiple—subjects of their moral lives and subjects within nature, seeing and seen, particularly present and projectively imagined.

The intensely world- and self-mediated character of human life constitutes the uniquely open field of freedom in which the phenomenon of *moral responsibility* germinates. Though humans exist inextricably within the pageantry of life's forms, human capacities uniquely enable us to imagine the future, to

envision alternative courses of action and their various possible consequences, to intend and choose and evaluate among these possibilities, and thus to be morally responsible. For these reasons, though all living things can be said to be *causally responsible, moral responsibility* is *manifestly human*. It germinates within the fecund space between who we understand ourselves to be and who we hope to become as we work on the world and symbolically engage the moral effects and possibilities of that work.

These preceding comments suggest one way of understanding the character and emergence of moral responsibility as a manifestly human phenomenon. But they do not begin to address questions about *how* we should exercise moral responsibility, *or* about the spheres of life within which responsibility ought to be exercised, *or* about the peculiar tasks of moral responsibility and moral imagination in a time of ecological crisis. *The problem of responsibility with which Jonas is concerned (and with which we all need to be concerned) is the problem that the moral consequences of human making and doing, rooted in our tool-making and tool-using capacities, now outrun the historic symbolic conventions of our moral imaginations.* Our symbolic second world is out of synch with the crisis in the first world of nature. We have produced these conditions of crisis; we are morally responsible for them; and we therefore exist in a historical moment that calls out for what I am referring to as an ecological *aesthethics*.

IV. Art and Religion

The vulnerability of the biosphere to increasingly destructive human creativity requires an equally efficacious *countercreativity* in our moral lives. Incremental political adjustments and quick technical fixes are inadequate responses to the ecological crisis insofar as the crisis is deeply rooted in human social and cultural patterns. The sources of the ecological crisis are seeded within the infrastructure of current human civilization, and response entails an historical transformation of moral consciousness.

If this is a primary task for contemporary ethics, then the religions and the arts become indispensable resources and catalysts for engaging it. This runs slightly against Jonas's concern that the conventions of religious morality have been outstripped by the novel moral demands of the ecological crisis. However, while Jonas may be right to point to the moral novelty of the ecological crisis, the arts and the religions can contribute significantly to the reimagining of moral perception and judgment needed in a time of ecological vulnerability. This imaginative task entails movement beyond the systemic values and structural forms of human social life that brought about the crisis in the first place. One of the most important moral projects of our time, then, is *the formation*

of cultural spaces committed to advancing aesthethical attunement to nature, to enculturating the capacities needed to hear and to respond to the "outcry of mute things."

The priority granted to the religions and the arts is due to their historic and ongoing work in the construction, maintenance, and subversion of the symbols and narratives and images that shape human moral imagination and consciousness. Both the arts and the religions have always existed in certain respects on the frontiers of human culture, dealing with the limit questions and perceptive limits of human existence. Throughout human history they have served as the wellsprings of moral imagination. Though they have sometimes endeavored to picture and narrate the world *as it is* or *as it seems,* they have also often served to catalyze perceptions of and commitments to the world *as it should or could be*. In addition to everything else they have been about, the arts and the religions have frequently worked in our lives in the mode of the moral subjunctive, casting visions and hopes for what our human moral relation to the worlds of nature and history could or should be like, if only we would rise up to the stature of our fuller responsibility.

In our time, this fuller stature of responsibility includes *aesthethical* attunement to the "outcry of mute things." And because this is of necessity a collective project, because the ecological crisis is multidimensional and globally scaled, the needed cultural spaces will encourage the crossing of boundaries of difference, the collation of diverse sources of knowledge, consultation across cultures, and the collaborative integration of our best wisdom into new forms of eco-social solidarity. Fortunately, these and other *aesthethical* themes of ecological responsibility have been manifesting themselves for some time in the religions and the arts.

Increasingly, the environment is being recognized as an integral and integrative religious and moral concern, not a divisive diversion. Environmental concerns are beginning to bring very different folks together. Here where I live in Chicago, for example, I am the faculty representative for *Oikos: Religion and Environment Initiative,* an interfaith group of students, activists, and community members that meets to learn about religious environmentalism and to take action on environmental issues. Chicago is also home to one of the most effective and innovative religious environmental groups in the country, *Faith in Place*. Led by Clare Butterfield, this organization facilitates ecological awareness and coordinates practical environmental actions among many different regional religious groups. At the national level, there are numerous religious environmental groups, such as the interfaith organizations National Religious Partnership on the Environment (NRPE), Religious Witness for the Earth (RWE), as well as more tradition-specific groups such as the Coalition on the

Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), and the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN). Globally, the Interfaith Global Climate Change Network (comprised of COEJL, NRPE, and the National Council of Churches [NCC] representatives) and the World Council of Churches (WCC), among other groups, have been very active in the manifesting of ecological responsibility among the religious.

Ecological responsibility is also increasingly manifest in the arts. It is certainly evident within the genealogy of American landscape. But it is also present in the rise of even more self-consciously ecological art—in art that not only represents the natural world, but which interacts with it by working with natural landscapes as canvases; in art that issues not only from observation of nature, but from motivations to reclaim and restore physical environments; and in art that intends not so much to induce reverie as to activate responsibility.[7] In these ways and others, the art world is manifesting ecological responsibility along with the religions.[8]

The religions and the arts thus contribute to what Paul Hawken refers to in his recent book, *Blessed Unrest,* as the largest "movement" in the history of the world. Combined of religious and secular groups in all sectors of society and truly reaching around the world, this "movement" is not tied to any particular ideology, but crosses ideological boundaries through its focus on the activation of ideas, specifically ideas about the manifesting of ecological and social responsibility. The diversity, diffusion, and decentralized character of this movement disperse the *aesthethical* seeds of ecological responsibility far and wide and deep.

Because the effective scope of the ecological crisis is global as well as local, and because it is intergenerational as well as contemporary, because it demands an expansion of our moral imaginations and the formation of cultural spaces committed to this reimaginative work, ecological responsibility has many dimensions and needs to be undertaken on multiple scales and at multiple sites simultaneously. From what I can tell, and from what Hawken and others are indicating, this is precisely what is happening. We may be approaching a tipping point ecologically, but it also seems that a tipping point of moral consciousness and action is also being approached. This is good news, if it is accurate, and it points in some promising directions.

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7. See for example the work of the Belgian artist Nils-Udo, (http://www.greenmuseum.org/content/artist_index/artist_id-36.html); Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison (http://www.greenmuseum.org/content/artist_index/artist_id-81.html); and Adam Straus, (http://ecoart.stores.yahoo.net/earday2006up.html).

8. A helpful place to begin research on ecological art is at http://ecologicalart.net/index.html.

The imperative of our time, to which the religions and the arts are beginning to respond, is to imagine more fully the value of human and more-than-human life and to enact more creatively our human moral responsibilities toward the present and future of life. This is the *aesthethical* calling of the present moral moment, to recreate the world by imaginatively rebinding the ecological and social orders of justice and beauty. This *aesthethical* work can and should be manifest in many forms. But at the moral core of this moral art is the idea that, as Simone Weil wrote, “The love of the order and beauty of the world . . . is the complement of the love of our neighbor.” This complementary love, she writes, “proceeds from the same renunciation. . . . To give up our imaginary position as the center, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, which means . . . to see the true light and hear the true silence.”[9] The morally generative, beautifully silent outcry of mute things . . .

9. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God,* 158–59.