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Beautiful Action

Its Function in the Ecological Crisis BY ARNE NAESS

We have, most of us, a stupid reluctance to learn from philosophers who belong to “trends” or “schools” that we find lead us astray. For me, the *so-called* critical philosophy of Kant and Kantians belongs to such a set of trends. I say so-called critical. Most trend-setting philosophers have been fiercely critical of other trends, but only Kant has been fortunate enough to influence historians in the last century to such an amazing degree that in their surveys they call Kant’s philosophy critical and Spinoza’s dogmatic. This is a rather arbitrary distinction. Already in the introduction to his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1963) Kant makes assumptions with far-reaching consequences without any attempt to justify them. They may well be said to be “uncritical” and “dogmatic,” at least for some plausible and important interpretations of these terms. Both Spinoza and Kant were firm believers in fundamental ideas that

they do not justify in their writings. To compare their levels of criticalness in a timeless, absolute sense presupposes that one has a third system that must be accepted uncritically. Or perhaps we don’t need that? Who knows?

In spite of Kant’s—in my opinion unfortunate— influence, in some ways his works are and will continue to be a major source of inspiration. In what follows I borrow his distinction between moral and beautiful actions. I foresee a bright future for this terminology. It offers a fairly new perspective on our actions within the realm of radical environmentalism, or more specifically within the deep ecology movement. The distinction was introduced by Kant in a work published in 1759, *Versuch einiger Betrachtungen über den Optimismus* (An attempt at some reflections on optimism), written in the period that uncritically is called his uncritical period. The distinction has been neglected by historians.

Reference to original publication: Naess, A. (2005). Beautiful action: Its function in the ecological crisis. In A. Drengson & H. Glasser (Eds.), *Selected Works of Arne Naess*, X (pp. 121–127). Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer. This article was first published in 1993 in *Environmental Values*, Spring, 67–71. Permission for publication on OpenAirPhilosophy generously granted by Springer.

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ACCORDING TO THE TERMINOLOGY of 1759 an act deserves the name *moral act* if it is solely motivated by respect for the moral law: you do it simply because it is your duty; there is no other motive. Presumably a factual mistake would not spoil the beauty of an action—if you have done your duty *trying* to find out the facts of the case.

Suppose you do your duty—you perform the action that the moral law prescribes—but not *just* because of respect for the moral law. You perform the act because you are inclined to act like that, or at least partly because you have the inclination. It “feels natural” to do it. In that case Kant calls the act *beautiful*. It is a moral not an immoral act. An immoral act is one that conflicts with the moral law. The beautiful act is in Kant’s view a morally complete act because it is benevolent. Benevolent action expands our love to embrace the whole of life. It completes us and perfects us.^[1]

It is not Kant’s habit in his main works to offer examples, but in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1949) he offers an interesting one. It is one’s duty, he says, to strive to keep alive, and there is a spontaneous inclination to do that. If you act more or less from the inclination to stay alive, the actions are not morally significant. Kant then paints a picture of a thoroughly unhappy human being who consistently desires to die but continues to try to stay alive, motivated solely by duty. This person acts in a morally right way according to Kant. Today, many people do not think it is always a duty to try to stay alive. In special cases, yes, notably because of the unhappiness or destitution of one’s own children and spouse. The temptation to follow inclination and make an end is resisted solely because one conceives it a duty to continue. Here the term *beautiful act* seems to me to be appropriate. One may in a philosophical seminar differ about the exact relation between respect for the moral law, respect for a moral duty, and respect for a duty,

but the conclusions and proposals in what follows do not seem to be gravely affected by this outcome.

Presumably Kant would not deny that it may make people glad when they do their duty. The inclination may not be there, they may find it painful or even cruel, as in a war, to do it, but they are glad *that* they resist the temptation *not* to do it. There is a conflict, a situation involving stress, we might say today. When we act beautifully no conflict of feelings is involved. It is above all characteristic of beautiful acts “that they display facility and appear to be accomplished without painful toil.” Incidentally, Kant entertained the opinion that women, more often than men, act beautifully, from compassion and goodheartedness. Men’s morality has the form of nobility, not beauty, but nobility is “extremely rare.”

SO MUCH FOR THE Kantian distinction itself. I now turn to its application in countries manifesting an increase of ecological unsustainability and largescale destruction of the habitats of other living beings.

The individuals and institutions trying to influence ecologically highly relevant actions in the right direction



Arne Naess. PHOTO: PETTER MEJLÆNDER

1. Kant, I. (1992). Versuch einiger Betrachtungen über den Optimismus (An attempt at some reflections on optimism). In *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*. Cambridge, UK: The University Press, pp. 78 ff.

manifest roughly three different strategies: appeal to the *usefulness* of ecologically positive actions, emphasis on *moral obligations*, and inducement to develop certain attitudes—*inclinations* in Kantian terminology.

Recently there has been in Norway and other countries an upsurge of interest in environmental ethics at the governmental level. It is accepted that there is a moral aspect, that both individuals and their governments have a *duty* or *obligation* to act in ecologically responsible ways. The moral appeal is gaining ground among policy makers. Sums of a different order than before have been earmarked for ethical studies as a follow-up to the Brundtland Report (United Nations 1987). No similar sums are available, or will in the near future be available, for the study of attitudes toward nature and the conditions favorable to changes in the direction of ecologically responsible actions on every level, including the governmental. These changes may in Kantian terminology be called changes in the direction of a greater inclination to act in ecologically responsible ways. An act in the sphere of efforts to overcome the ecological crisis is a moral act if, and only if, it is motivated by the call to do our duty. Then there are acts with ecologically beneficial results that “display facility and appear to be accomplished without painful toil”—they are *beautiful* acts within the realm of ethically and ecologically relevant contexts. Again incidentally: insofar as we rely on Kant’s judgment, we should expect women to be the main driving force in fostering ecologically relevant beautiful acts.

A very common comment by people hearing a description of deep ecology for the first time is “But I’ve always thought this. I just did not have words for it.” They presumably had acted beautifully, without toil, and without words! It is unnecessary to add that the information “This means you have always acted beautifully!” might have made them proud and eager to continue.

OBVIOUSLY, THERE IS ALWAYS the possibility that a beautiful act does not have the intended short- or long-range consequences that were intended. This ap-

plies in principle, according to Kant, to every action. When a policy is chosen on the basis of its usefulness or on the basis of morality, there is also this fundamental uncertainty. During the first great green wave (the late 1960s and early 1970s), millions developed the habit of turning off the electric lights when they served no immediate purpose. To leave them burning was difficult, unnatural. Then came sceptics repeating that the useful life of a lightbulb would be severely shortened if turned off and on “too much,” and to make a new bulb would consume much energy and resources. Many felt frustrated because they saw the uncertainty of both strategies: the calculation of the basis of utility versus reliance on an acquired natural inclination.

People badly informed *may* cause small ecological disasters, making false judgments of a factual character. Today more than ever it is one of our duties to keep informed; the better we are informed, the better our basis for predicting consequences.

Acting from inclination is superior to acting from duty. This vague announcement needs comment. First, acting from duty requires conscious analysis of the situation and does not exclude acting in spite of strong disinclination. The sense of duty is generally not very strong, and because conscious analysis is required, or often required, the ways of avoiding unpleasantness through talk are considerable. “It *seems* it is now my duty to do such and such, but close analysis shows that I really do not need to do such and such.”

If it is urgent to have people behave in a certain way in a particular situation, the question “Are there any ways we could make them *inclined* to act (energetically and nonviolently) in that way?” has priority. There are not many noble heroes, and if people are influenced to act from inclination, a stable habit is formed, whereas the moral act, at least as it seems to be conceived by Kant, normally does not form a habit. If it forms a habit, it starts feeling natural, and an inclination occurs. In short, the moral act glides into a beautiful act. In the terminology of social science, norms are *internalized*. Perhaps Kant has underestimated this

development. It increases the importance of appeals to moral capacity, but it does not reduce the importance of processes that tend to induce inclination directly, internalization with verbalized normative appeals: utterances like “See how nice this animal (flower, landscape, . . .) is” or “I wish I could help these people who are forced to live in this polluted area; such work would make me happy!” There are appeals through body language that induce joy and a process of identification. Such processes make up the non-reflective imitation and adaptation to society of children.

In his monumental *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Critique of practical reason), Kant goes deeper, but I shall not bring this work into our discussion. We have such and such a special duty in such and such kinds of situations. Mostly the adequate reason in answer to the question “Why do we have that duty in that kind of situation?” is in terms of higher-order moral norms combined with a relevant classification of the kind of situation at hand. Duties are *relational*, a term better suited than *relative*. Intense, protracted questioning more or less inevitably leads in the direction of codified systems of normative ethics. It has been done most thoroughly by the Catholic Church in the more stable Middle Ages. Here it is only relevant to remind us of the moral *corrigibility* of any concrete announcement of a duty in a concrete situation, and the analogous need for change in the direction of a beautiful action. Hypotheses about the “facts” of the situation are involved.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN WAYS to promote more and more consistently beautiful actions in the fight for ecological sustainability? This is a battle that has to be fought by individuals in their private capacity and by all sorts of institutions in the wide sense.

It is easiest to start with educational institutions in the materially rich countries—from kindergartens to postgraduate schools. In the kindergartens, the body language of the respected people taking care of the children is decisive. The care and respect manifested in every interaction with every living being has immediate and strong

effect. One of the necessary conditions is the presence of such beings. In Tokyo and many other places we find kindergartens (children gardens!) practically without any noticeable nonhuman life-forms except some occasional flies, which are treated as intruders. Much of the space is occupied by various mechanical contraptions.

In elementary schools, knowledge is often taken to be as important as appreciation, insight, feelings of nearness and of wonder. (Children are conceived as beings who must be useful, successful, and well entertained.) The socialization process is important, but unhappily the “environment” children are mostly adapted to today is the extremely poor communities of human beings, dogs and cats, and perhaps some spectacular, big plants, roses, and so on. The teachers are not expected to manifest love and respect for life, nor to reveal the difference between life quality and standard of living in their interactions with the children.

At the other end of the formal teaching, the postgraduate seminars, even when life-forms are studied, the style in which they are taught is from the viewpoint of an observer, not a participant. Field trips are rarely made in silence such that students can hear clearly what trees or tiny animals and plants are telling them. The focus on interaction with fellow students is permitted to go on as if they were alone and not together with a myriad of beings. Nor are they taught to express what they *really* experience and what gestalts they participate in, leaving subject-object relations out. They may obtain their doctorates without ever *sensing* what they are talking about, and if they have gained cognition (not only knowledge) of the third kind (Spinoza), they are not stimulated to consider how to *inspire* others, how to *lead* them without many words to acquire the third kind, the understanding love and loving understanding (*intellectualis amor = amor intellectualis*).

When we proceed to the subject of institutions, the social and political framework of the individual, practically nothing is done to protect the insights a minority has gained and to stimulate further gains. The United Nations *World Charter for Nature* (1982) is not taken

seriously when it proclaims the intrinsic value of Nature independent of narrow usefulness for human beings.

What about the sphere of policies for fisheries? Is the Kantian distinction relevant? The leaders of organized labor and the politicians of the labor party—for example, in Norway—know that previous policies have been disastrous for the richness and diversity of fish in vast areas. They know they have to propose exasperatingly small quotas. This perpetuates high unemployment. Their duty is clear, but the unemployed fishermen are furious. The political life of the leaders is in this situation precarious. The temptation to propose somewhat bigger quotas is normally there, but for the few who have internalized ecological norms, there is no temptation whatsoever. To propose unpopular reg-



Arne Naess entering Tvergastein, in the early 1990s. PHOTO: JØRN MOEN

ulations based on ecological considerations is the only, and the completely natural, thing to do. Of course, they are risking their political life. But with joy? Certainly not. With inner satisfaction, yes. As a moral act in the Kantian sense? Perhaps.

Richness and diversity *must* be increased. This goal is so evident that to say it to oneself in words is superfluous. A labor party minister of fisheries resigned recently after having been able to establish strict quotas. She presumably had had enough unpleasantness from the furious fishermen who had lost their jobs. Had she acted beautifully? I think the Kantian distinction works better for people who do not have the kind of power and responsibility of leaders in Western democracies.

In short, there is little understanding that fostering *inclination* is essential in every aspect of socialization and acculturation and therefore also in the global ecological crisis. Moralizing is too narrow, too patronizing, and too open to the question “Who are *you*? What is the relation of your preaching and your life?” An invitation to act beautifully, to show beautiful acts rather than talk about them, to organize society with all this in mind, may recognize and acclaim such acts, and be a decisive factor that at last will decrease the unsustainability. “Tell me about your beautiful acts today! Do the authorities encourage such acts?”

What I have offered for reflection is a small variation in our perspective, looking at what goes on in terms of a Kantian distinction. Thank you, Immanuel.

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