Attending to the Full Moral Landscape: The Role of Affect in Revealing Obligations to the Other-Than-Human World

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Introduction
This project explores the idea of recognizing ethical obligations to the other-than-human world. In particular, it emphasizes understanding emotional responses to other-than-human parts of nature as reflecting a proper apprehension of the moral landscape that allows insight into our obligations towards other beings.

Although there is overlap with other work in environmental ethics, I specifically relate Margaret O. Little’s moral epistemology to our emotional experiences and illustrate how a gestalt shift from ‘humans as apart-from’ to ‘humans as embedded’ makes the issue of how we live with and in this world a more complicated moral picture.

Seeing and shifting
Hand-in-hand with the idea of affect as a necessary condition for moral knowledge is the role of seeing. Responsible moral knowing includes openness to affective responses. The quality of perception is crucial.

“Amply enough, nature is a different kind of theatre, not one that we can easily predict but one that offers us new perspectives on ways we might otherwise view the world. Nature offers us a different kind of theatre.” (Little 1999)

In Muncie’s story, where a mother holds a poor opinion of her son’s wife, even though she traced her daughter-in-law and doesn’t see her daughter show, the mother thinks her son could do better than this “village girl” (Muncie 17). Eventually the son and his wife move away, and the mother comes to reflect on her feelings. She sees the situation and realizes that maybe she was unfair. Her perspective shifts, and she recognizes her daughter in-law as a lively and sympathetic young woman. Now that she is seeing her relationship with her daughter-in-law with the right quality of perception, she can truly care about her. Nothing in the comoned world has changed, what has changed is the mother’s apprehension of the situation.

Gestalt shifts resulting in appropriate affect are not only possible, but potentially necessary for accurate moral epistemology. Furthermore, we have all sorts of reasons to recognize our relationship with the other-than-human world as forming a different gestalt than dominant anthropocentrism.

Affect refers to desires and emotions—our ways of experiencing and interacting with the world that are felt.

Margaret Olivia Little argues that “Affect ... has an irreplaceable role in moral epistemology” (1995). Becoming avoids anxiety means something different than simply noting a situation.

For example, there’s a difference between seeing torture as painful and seeing torture as wrong or evil. Full moral knowing requires being affected in the appropriate way—seeing doesn’t give us a full picture of the moral landscape.

Even an ideal knower with access to the relevant social, psychological, and physical facts of a situation wouldn’t actually have full moral knowledge if they were observing from a detached, ‘seeing perspective’ where “all is seen but nothing is felt” (Jurec 12). Perfect epistemic power must include feeling, not only observing.

If Little’s picture is correct, then feelings of care and relatedness towards the other-than-human world can be understood as affect playing its role in revealing a detail of the full moral landscape. For example, when we have an empathetic response to seeing a plastics-burrowed river, that’s different than knowing statistics about pollution, because our affective capacities are engaged. These feelings of care and relatedness enable us to notice morally salient details that “pure facts” can’t show us.

Our emotional responses to the other-than-human world are a source of moral knowledge.

A possible objection: why care?
Even if we accept Little’s thesis that affect is necessary for moral epistemology, is it about members of the other-than-human community that make them deserving of care?

There are many ways to answer this question—metaphysical, scientific, spiritual—but the point of this project is simply to point out that if affect is necessary for proper moral knowledge, then approaching the other-than-human world with a proper moral epistemology, then the other-than-human world with proper moral epistemology, then the other-than-human world with proper moral epistemology, then the other-than-human world with proper moral epistemology, then the other-than-human world with proper moral epistemology.

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What are our obligations?
There are many pressing environmental issues that impact human wellbeing and give us substantial reasons to care about the conservation and protection of nature. Hence, the point of this project is to suggest that our affective responses are part of the moral relevance of other-than-human beings to whom we have obligations that are not solely related to human interests.

Our most general obligation is to engage with the other-than-human world in a new way.

Learning and awareness:

This project explores the idea of affect as a necessary condition for moral knowledge in the role of seeing. Responsible moral knowing includes openness to affective responses. The quality of perception is crucial.

Mary Midgley wrote that “Direct concern about the destruction of the Earth world is still a natural, spontaneous feeling within us, and one that we no longer have reasons to suppress. We know ... that we are closely akin to a whole continuum of other life forms” (Individualism and Gaia 49).

Midgley also wrote that “emotional fellowship” is at the heart of what makes humans deserving of care and consideration (Persons and Non-Persons 62). If this is so, then when we experience emotional fellowship with the other-than-human world, we should pay attention to this affective response as chang ing us in to our potential moral considerations.

An expansive affective attitude towards other-than-human beings is something that can and should be nurtured. For example, when I plant a garden, I could see the tomato plant as a living object, one that I want to keep alive so that I can give rise to moral dilemmas. Then, the obligation to find ways of engaging in reciprocity, to give back as well as to take, may sound impossible, or perhaps simply foolish, but if we are to take seriously the idea that acting as if we are in the important moral standing of beings beyond humanity, it becomes imperative. Gratitude, care, education, continuously broadening our affective attention, and striving to foster caring relationships with the other-than-human world are good starting points.

Conclusion

When we attend to our experiences with nature in an open, caring way, we can more easily and accurately ascertain the moral significance of other-than-human parts of nature. When we are more aware and use it as something other than a resource or inanimate object that can be used, we come to fully appreciate the being as something that is part of the moral landscape.

Recognizing a gestalt of deep interrelatedness with the other-than-human world, our emotional responses to other-than-human beings would moral obligations to care for the rest of nature and consider our relationship with the other-than-human world as a moral issue.

Kimmerer admits that “the philosophy of reciprocity is beautiful in the abstract, but the practical is hard,” but who said that morality is easy? By particular, the obligation to find ways of engaging in reciprocity, to give back as well as to take, may sound impossible, or perhaps simply foolish, but if we are to take seriously the idea that acting as if we are in the important moral standing of beings beyond humanity, it becomes imperative. Gratitude, care, education, continuously broadening our affective attention, and striving to foster caring relationships with the other-than-human world are good starting points.

Works Cited


“Revisiting the photos from “Setting the stage.” Look at this tomato plant. What might the moral landscape look like now?”

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