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Aisthesis as an Ethical Practice

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1 Abstract

The scientific evidence of climate change and the drastic consequences of human pollution become clearer every day. Meanwhile, the societal and discursive reality still fails to adjust in an appropriate fashion. It appears as if the statistical data and scientific arguments do not suffice to enable a sustainable change of behaviour. Concurrently, the philosophical discourse of ethics has little to offer to articulate a coherent answer for environmental issues either, as ethics are still predominantly anthropocentric and focussed around idealist concepts of the *animal rationale* dealing exclusively with the realm of consciousness. As more people are confronted with drastic changes to nature, like environmental disasters, the mutation of traditional seasons or even the pollution of beaches, however, the experience of nature itself is becoming *evident* in a new way. This evidence transcends a rational belief – as it is a *corporeal* experience. My research project aims to inject this corporeity in the philosophical discourse of environmental ethics. Deconstructing the current debate from a post-structuralist and post-modern perspective (Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault etc.), building upon ideas from (new) phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, Waldenfels, Schmitz, Heidegger, etc.), critical posthumanism (Wolfe, Haraway etc.) and merging them with concepts of contemporary aesthetics (Welsch, Menke, Böhme, Berleant etc.), I will demonstrate how the sensitive, embodied and aesthetic perception of nature as *aisthesis* can serve as a conceptual yet practical correction of and apposition to current environmental ethics. From this perspective, the sensitive examination with nature is not only an aesthetic task but also an ethical practice

with serious epistemic consequences. To exemplify this, particular *artistic* practices will serve as conceptual agents to demonstrate these practices in the context of contemporary art history. To finally rearticulate *aisthesis* as an eco-ethical practice as I suggest, I will radically expand its scope of application beyond the realm of fine arts.

2 Introduction / Theory

In order to gain an understanding of my methodology, it is essential to first introduce the philosophical traditions and concepts of thought that underlie it. I embrace a multi-perspective approach and to understand theories in Foucault's sense as tool kits¹ that can be opened, using individual tools without unconditionally following a mono-perspective tradition.

A The issue of truth / Ethics

The traditional occidental ethical doctrines, from Socrates and Aristotle to Kant and current discursive ethics, have not been able to establish a foundation on which today's fundamental questions of environmental ethics can be decided (Böhme 2008, 12). The

¹ All my books (...) are, if you will, small tool kits. If people want to open them up and use this or use that sentence, idea or analysis as a screwdriver, (...) well good, all the better. (Foucault 1976, 53)

core problem hereby is their addressee: moral questions were directed at one's own life, lived with and in relationship to other subjects, but not at the relationship to an external nature. Even contemporary positions in environmental ethics struggle to correct this issue. While anthropological theories about the protection of the environment still only address the consequences for human life (Norton 1984), ecocentric philosophers postulate an intrinsic value of nature itself². However, the difficulty of using deontological reasoning to establish this value, as demanded by some environmental ethicists, is its justifiability. This is especially true for arguments that promote an intrinsic value of organic life – encountering difficulties in defining the limits and boundaries of this definition. While some posthumanist positions choose to include animal life as a form of conscious being (Aloi 2015; Haraway 2008), others draw the line at the latest after organic fauna (Taylor 1986; Schweitzer 1998). Even then, however, we are faced with the issue of problematising radical interventions in nature like deforming of mountains or the consumption of finite inorganic earthly materials.

As an alternative to deontological ethics, environmental pragmatism (Light & Katz 1996) and consequentialism distance themselves from a transcendental morality and focuses on the impact and consequences of actual actions. Yet they also reach their limits when it comes to the important questions of environmental ethics, one of the reasons being that the consequences in environmental developments such as the course of climate change are often hypothetical, as their actual outcome and scale can never be predicted with

² For the discussion on functional vs. intrinsic value in environmental ethics see: McShane (2007), Callicott (1984, 1986, 1989, 1999), O'Neill (1992)

complete scientific certainty. The consequences can only be projected – so the question arises: which of the diverse projections has the right to predict the ethical foundations? Moreover, the above-mentioned question remains: *whose* perspectival consequences are actually to be considered for an ethical evaluation?

An eminent figure in the historical foundation of ecological ethics is Hans Jonas. In his argumentation, however, he too remains attached to the concept of freedom and thus clearly to *conscious* life (Jonas 1973, 1979). His ethics are therefore ultimately logocentric and based on the theoretical possibility that animals could develop into humans at some point. Another example is Holmes Roston III (1988, 1994) who also tried to prove the intrinsic value of nature, focusing on the *goal-directed* behaviour of every form of life. These *ethics of will* can be found today in various animal ethics arguments (Regan 1983). Peter Singer (1981), a contemporary American ethicist, describes the broadening of the ethical addressees as an *expanding circle* - while the ethical focus began on one's own self, the circle gradually expanded to include specific other people such as the family, circles such as the clan and the nation, and humanity as a whole. In fact, Singer welcomes a constant expansion of this circle: through animals and all living things to fauna and ultimately to the earth as a whole. However, while this approach sounds optimistic and de-anthropocentric, it has conceptual flaws that have been pointed out from several perspectives. Anthony Weston, for example, criticises the *geometry* of the circle of ethical expansion, for it remains what he calls *con-centric* (Weston 2009, 90). Although ultimately the whole world can be understood as part of the circle, its core remains *singular*. The

categorical diversity of the world is thus brought together under a single point of reference: *man* (often quite literally, as eco-feminists rightfully point out). Instead, Weston proposes a system of multi-centrism in which moral growth consists of experiencing more and more deeply the texture of multiplicity in the world, not in tracing the wider circles set off from one single centre (ibid., 92). This epistemic acceptance of the categorial other is also a core critique of postcolonial and eco-feminist theorists. In a joint anthology called *Decentering the Center* (Narayan & Harding 2000), effective comparisons are made between the construction of oppressive Self-Other dichotomies in human spheres (man versus woman, white versus black) and similarly oppressive dichotomies in the spheres beyond humanity (human versus animal; human versus world). Plumwood (2002) identifies all these examples as demonstrations of a hegemonic centrism that always puts otherness in relation to its own point of reference. The counter-hegemonic goal, however, should be to “attain solidarity with others *in their difference*” – instead of trying to incorporate and subsequently subsume these differences in understanding them only in relation to one's own self (Plumwood 2002, 201). This criticism is also worth considering for eco-centric *holistic* ethics³ (Sylvan 1973; Rodman 1977) and obviously opposes con-centric ethics.

Consistent multi-centrism thus forms the epistemic framework in which appropriate ethics can be discussed. Here the conceptual proximity to post-structuralist and post-modern

³ Holism emerged as an alternative to ecological individualism, arguing that not only should the value of individual creatures be considered, but that the whole ecosystem as such has an inherent value (McShane 2009, 411).

theories becomes evident. Thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari (1977), who with their model of the *rhizome* demand the complete dissolution of dichotomous subjectivity, can hence offer further help in understanding such a frame of thought. It might not be by coincidence that they chose to use a biological metaphor to substantiate this key concept of their ontology.

Even with this premise, however, the question of nature's inherent *value* remains widely unanswered. As Gerholt Becker correctly points out, theology used to serve as an teleological basis to argue for the intrinsic value of nature. In order to rearticulate this value, contemporary secular ethics needs to revise its arguments in favour of the 'metaphysical' quality of nature per se (King-Tak 2009, 2). So what are the potential ways to regain a perspective on these intrinsic qualities? As I will argue, it is necessary to find a new *methodological* angle to look at this issue. In order to achieve this, we have to critically re-examine the foundational tool of philosophical reasoning altogether – *ratio*; the cognitive faculty.

B The issue of corporeity / Phenomenology

The epistemic hegemony of rationality has a long history in the occident, essentially starting in ancient Greece. In a Socratic dialogue, Plato cites the philosopher as speaking of death as being nothing more than the separation of the soul from the body – and that the philosopher strives for precisely this separation during his lifetime (Plato *Phaidon*, 63b). The body was separable – sometimes even understood as the prison of the soul (Innozenz III., 42); true knowledge, which seeks the imperishable and clear, seemed only possible independent of bodily knowledge, which on the other hand was argued to be unclear and transitory (Fingerhut, Hufendiek, Wild 2013, 19). Plato himself articulated the theory of ideas, which gave the essentialist idea of a thing the ontological precedence over its physical form. Hundreds of years later, Descartes famously underlined this mind-body dualism, finally disconnecting the mind from the body and moreover postulating the ontological difference between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* in the world as a whole (Röd 1982, 72). Building upon these ideas, the western philosophical idealism developed this epistemic dichotomy with Hegel and Kant for a significant period of time without fundamentally questioning it, arguably still heavily influencing the majority of philosophical schools to date.

Phenomenology arose in distinct opposition to this radical dualism (Becke 1999, 12). It took a stance against the “positivist reduction of experience” and the “intellectual constructions” of Neo-Kantianism that covered the things like an *Ideenkleid* (dress of

ideas) (Waldenfels 1980, 11). Heidegger stated that there has been violence against the thing-like of the things – and that this violence stemmed from strict rationality (Heidegger 1994, 14). Hence, following Husserl, phenomenologists explored methods to get back to the things themselves (Husserl 1984, 10).

Heidegger (1986) argued against the idea of a separable subject that is opposed to a world of objects altogether. According to him, subjective being (in his terminology: *Dasein*) can only be understood as being-in-the-world – in symbiotic relation with the world (*Umwelt*) and other existential being (*Mitsein*). This inherent connectedness ontologically precedes the isolated subject: so, its conceptual separation becomes absolutely untenable. It was Merleau-Ponty, however, who additionally pointed out the extreme undervaluation of the felt-body. He highlighted the fundamental significance of embodiment of every perception: its *corporeity*. This had consequences for the subjective perception and reasoning, but also touched on the notion of being-in-the-world – as he argued that we indeed are *of the same stuff* as the world, *inhering* it (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 218). Recently, Hermann Schmitz established the New Phenomenology to further refine those ideas, rediscovering what he calls *instinctive experience of life* (“unwillkürliche Lebenserfahrung”) that had been blocked by a constructive thinking of a *conceptive attention* (“begreifenden Aufmerksamkeit”) (Schmitz 2014, 13). But what does this mean for environmental ethics?

Böhme argues, that because of the current environmental problems we are being confronted with our corporeity in a new way. He states that we have to acknowledge that we live in and with a nature, in a way in the draught (“*Durchzug*”) of the natural media. Soil/earth (“*Erde*”), water and air drift through us, and we can only live with this draught. With this experience it becomes suddenly evident that humans are not only or primarily rational beings, but that they are corporeal beings (Böhme 2017, 14). Following this phenomenological observation, it is advisable to reexamine the basic moral principles on which environmental ethics are founded as they are predominantly built on idealist transcendental moral philosophy. Logically, because these moral foundations are determined rationally and *a priori*, they are intentionally and epistemically disconnected to from ontic corporeality, as discussed before. Examples of environmental philosophy focussing on this idea do exist (Weston 2009, Böhme 1989), but are still rare and yet to be developed further.

C The issue of perception / Aesthetics

Apart from the corporeal aspect of rational disconnection another argument is to be made about the perception of nature itself. Whereas nature used to be defined by its unavailable character, the dominant scientific knowledge of recent centuries has led to the insight that nature is not only the *object* of research but also *material* for human development: a changeable object of action. Heidegger pointed out that the modern age is dominated by technology. In his terminology, however, technology is not to be understood as a

particular kind of human-made artefact, but rather signifies a “way of revealing” (Heidegger 1996, 318) of being. His basic idea is that a growing amount of things in fact reveal themselves technologically as *Bestand*: as something that is there for something else. If we consider saving South American rainforest to maintain its benefits for the global carbon balance, for example, the forest does not reveal itself as itself, but as *Bestand* – basically as a *purpose* for something that lies outside it. Following this argument, the *extrinsic* (or functional) value that is given to the so-called natural resources fundamentally disables us from perceiving the various ways in which the world actually *exists* and *matters*. The specific forest becomes an interchangeable resource as long as the regarded value addition can be attained elsewhere. Paradoxically, the discursive focus on the statistical aggravation of environmental problems may thus phenomenologically obscure the ontological perception of nature.

So how is it possible to regain access to the thing in itself? An attempt to answer is provided by the tradition of *aesthetics*⁴. Before philosophical aesthetics shifted to being a study of the beautiful, the sublime and – above all – the fine arts (Kant, Hegel, etc.), its founder Baumgarten actually thought about the area of application in a much broader way. Sloterdijk summons this idea as he writes: “To notice something is perception, is aesthetics in the broadest sense.” (Sloterdijk 1987, 125). Exploring and developing this thought, Wolfgang Welsch (1996a, 2017) also drew on this position and reintroduced aesthetic perception and knowledge as ontological *aisthesis* into the discourse of

⁴ Some examples of works about the aesthetic dimension of environment include: Berleant (2002), Brady (2003), Budd (2002).

contemporary philosophical aesthetics⁵. He underlined the importance of aesthetic perception and aesthetic thinking *per se*: The aesthetic has to not only be – to speak of *aesthetic thinking* – the *object* of reflexion, but rather has to affect the core of thinking itself. This approach is characterised by a critical examination of propositionality: the Aristotelian rule of logic, that every statement can be understood as a judgment that is either true or false (Met., IV). Dieter Mersch stated that aesthetic thinking offers not only a contrasting *way* of thinking, but a completely different *thinking* itself: a thinking which formulates its 'thoughts' beyond all opposition between determinacy and indeterminacy, sharpness and blurriness or clarity and intricacy, and which cannot be grasped in their dichotomies (Mersch 2014, 39).

In such an approach no synthesis takes place, the claim is not a general one - but should be understood as *ecstatic (self-) reasoning* (cf. *ibid.*, 40). Looking at a tree in a forest, we can thus endure the paradox of perceiving it *ecstatically* as a *general singularity* - and distance ourselves from the understanding of understanding it as a synthesised proposition of presumptions, perceptions and values. It is thus a way to gain access to the thing in itself in a phenomenological sense. Arguably, this is what Nietzsche was suggesting when he brought forward the demand to see science from the perspective of

⁵ Welsch (1990, 1996a) and Böhme (e.g. 1989, 1995, 1998) introduced the so-called “aisthesis debate” in German discourse. Welsch continued his argument later in his comprehensive investigation of “transversal reason” (1996b), as did Böhme in his theory of perception (2001) and its application to build environments (2006). Adler (2002) offers an overview of the aisthesis debate in English. In addition to those, aisthesis-oriented contributions have been made by Berleant (particularly 2010), Diaconu (2005) and Mandoki (2007).

the artist (Nietzsche 1980, 14). This form of non-propositional knowledge is fundamental to the establishment of a consistent multicentrism as I have presented in chapter 1A. The establishment of a post-hegemonic multiperspectivity and acceptance of categorical multiplicity and otherness requires the fundamental questioning of propositional thinking altogether. If we assign the Other to a dichotomous category, we can only make this decision if we have already decided in favour of the primacy of the propositional and have implemented a policy of exclusion from it (Mersch 2014, 38). This is why Marc Le Bot argues: "Artistic thinking takes a stand for the experience of otherness in the ethical positions (...). It consists essentially in the recognition of the other as different" (Le Bot 1994, 208). In doing so, it updates not only the experience of the other, but also that of oneself: "In art, there is indeed a double experience of otherness: that of the other as different, but also that of myself as different" (ibid., 209). As a consequence, a form of de-subjectivisation of one's own takes place, which Vivian Sobchak describes as inter-objectivity. Only the self-perception as *object-for-me* thus enables the encounter with other non-intentional objects and their capture *an sich* (in itself) (Sobchak 1994, 202): "as we feel our being-in-the-world as a going out of our being-something over our being-nothing, we are able, although always subjective from within, to give up a large part of our self-consciousness and to feel ourselves suddenly transferred into the multiplicity of being as flesh" (ibid., 203). This experience is again not to be understood as a rational state, but as genuinely corporeal. In one's own objectification there is a recognition of one's own materiality, which is the same as that of which the world is made up; Merleau-Ponty calls this joint materiality *la chair* (flesh) (Merleau-Ponty 1986, 182). The

phenomenologist writes about a painter as an example of aesthetic practice and perception:

(...) the sighted, who is occupied by the seen, still sees himself: there is a basic narcissism for every seeing (...) I feel being observed by things, and my activity is equally passivity - which is the second and deeper meaning of narcissism: not to see the outline of a body from the outside as others do, but to be seen by it, to exist in it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, tied up and alienated by the phantom, so that the sighted and the visible are interchanged and one no longer knows who sees and who is seen.

(ibit. 183)

At this point it becomes clear that the aesthetic practices I have proposed for the examination of ethical questions must not be understood as classical creation processes. The disposition of the artist as an author must hence be overcome altogether, as Roland Barthes (1977, 142) has already suggested in his deconstructionist essay *The Death of the Author*. In the context of this work, my ethical investigation instead focuses on the underlying epistemological foundation in aesthetic thinking. Certain artists or artworks can help to make this type of thinking visible and easier to examine. Yet, in this examination, my main goal will be to reflect upon mutual aesthetic relations of *resonance* (Rosa 2016) between creator, piece and artwork instead of solely considering the work itself. This investigation will therefore not look at subjects nor objects; not at creators or recipients – rather I will put emphasis on the perception of a common *in-between*: what new

phenomenology describes as shared *atmosphere* (Böhme 1998, 2006, 2017). Olafur Eliasson's famous installation "The Weather Project"⁶ is a good example of manifesting this idea in an artistic context. It examines the relationship between nature, its representation and subjective perception. In creating an immersive and spatial experience rather than a distinctive object, the artwork becomes a shared space that fundamentally challenges the notion of the possibility to perceive separable objects. In this experience, Zhoufei Wang argues, it becomes "considerably more difficult to grasp spatial depth, specific contours, and details of individual objects from any visual angle. (...) A spatial phenomenon is thus created by which visitors feel surrounded. All things are merged into a harmonious whole" (Wang 2017).



Exhibition view: "The Weather Project", Tate Modern Museum 2003.

⁶ "In 2003, "The Weather Project" was exhibited in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern Museum, in London. Starting from the ubiquitous subject of weather, Eliasson explored the relationship between representations of nature and human perception. The main materials of this experimental design are monofrequency lamps, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminum, and scaffolding. At the opposite end of the hall is the representation of the sun. The structure of the sun consists of semicircularly arranged lamp group behind a semi-transparent foil. Through the arc repeated in the mirror overhead a radiant sphere is thus created, symbolizing the link between reality and virtuality. The sky is represented by a mirrored ceiling that dominates the expanse of the space." (Wang 2017)

Or as Merleau-Ponty puts it more generally: “Environment is not wholly dependent on the perceiving subject. It also imposes itself in significant ways on the human person, engaging one in a relationship of mutual influence. Not only is it misleading to objectify the environment; it cannot be taken as a mere reflection of the perceiver, either” (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 8). *Aisthesis* then should be regarded as *active perceptual engagement* (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 8); as a type of perception as *affectedness* and *merging co-execution* (Böhme 2017, 29).

2 Methodology

“Philosophy too left behind formerly paradigmatic – even transcendental – points of reference or, according to one’s perspective, renewed and intensified its critique of reason through movements such as phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, pragmatism, analytic philosophy, critical theory, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-colonial-, and gender theory. A transdisciplinary, artistic-philosophical approach that proceeds not just reflectively, but investigates aisthesis empirically, and, also in respect to its reflective components, remains close to what can be experienced in perception, would certainly mean a logical continuation and even further radicalization of a critique of reason, with consequences not only for aesthetics, but equally for fields as epistemology, ethics, social-, and political theory – as well as for our understanding of philosophy.”

(Hinkes 2017, 69)

The starting point of my discussion will be the theoretical contextualisation of the philosophical debate around environmental ethics. First, I will present the most relevant positions in that field, highlighting the current debates and thinking patterns. In my opinion however, it is crucial to additionally trace the genealogy of these arguments. I will therefore create a brief overview of the classical positions of the past, linking them to the present discourse. Fortunately, Gernot Böhme has already done a great deal of work in this respect with his work *Klassiker der Naturphilosophie* (classics of nature philosophy) (Böhme 1989b). After I have drawn up an overview of the various positions, I will critically question and classify them with regard to their epistemological references. I have already

sketched out some of the problems of these debates above. Finally, I will outline the fundamental discussions between the various arguments.

In the second section of the work I will introduce traditions of thought that fundamentally contradict the foundations of the positions initially introduced and which offer an epistemic realm of alternative ways to construct a new ethical discourse. In doing so, I will particularly focus on the new phenomenology as well as the new aesthetics - two contemporary fields of research that have found considerable resonance in the German discourse in recent years. As I will argue, in environmental ethics it is crucial to not focussing on daily political issues only, but also to examine the ontological foundations on which large parts of today's discourse are resting. Additionally, I will show how movements like eco-feminism (Warren 1990), deep ecology (Naess 1973, 1995; Devall, Sessions 1985), critical posthumanism (Wolfe 1998, 2009) and even postcolonial studies made significant arguments that can be built upon in this context. At the end of the second part, I will enrich these thoughts with my own problematisations of the current debate, questioning the idea of moral monism (Stone 1988) and critically sharpen my research questions and radicalising their relevance.

Thirdly, I will present a series of arguments concerning, in particular, practical ethics. In the postmodern and phenomenological sense, I will not work in a strictly analytical way, but rather involve corporeality in perception. Following new aesthetics, I will study the *specific* in an exemplary and fragmentary way, focussing on what Mersch (2014) calls the

general singularity. In doing so, I will first of all embark on an art-historical search for practices that can be understood as ethical practices in the sense of my thesis. In particular, I will examine performance art, installation art and bio-installations to discuss their relevance to the philosophical debate on environmental ethics. Through this specific examination of these works I will further deepen and substantiate my arguments because, as Wang puts it, “by using them as an example, the theoretical insights of atmosphere can be tested, and further perspectives of the sensuous relationship with the environment and nature can be developed” (Wang 2018). Finally, I will move from the micro to the macro level and draw conclusions that imply substantial epistemic conclusions for environmental ethics in general.

3 Conclusion

Developing new perspectives to address the dramatic environmental problems is one of the key challenges of the 21st century. By combining different traditions of thought and new methodologies, I would like to contribute to developing a multi-perspective approach to environmental ethics. Through my studies at the University of the Arts Berlin, which are based on contemporary communication theory and stand in the tradition of postmodernism, as well as my Master's degree at the University of Hildesheim, a leading German institution for research into questions of aesthetic practice in philosophical and phenomenological contexts, I want to develop a new perspective that expands the current discourse of environmental ethics. The intercultural exchange at your faculty will certainly further enrich this work in a significant way.

For all of these reasons, I would be very keen to conduct this research in cooperation with your university.

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