



Individual Experiences and Emotions: Sources of Normativity in Environmental and Climate Ethics?

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This thematic issue rests on three observations. First, within climate ethics, the individual, their lifeworld and their personal experiences typically play only a minor role. Climate ethics is a straightforward example of an applied ethics that is mainly focused on the level of collectives—societies, group agents like NGOs or multinational companies, principles that should govern international agreements on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions etc.¹ Second, within environmental ethics, only some types of individual encounters and experiences with those natural environments that surround us are discussed at length while other forms and modes are often neglected. Third, different traditions and discourses that analyze the importance of individual encounters with nature often do not take notice of each other; the research field is fragmented.

Based on these observations, this thematic issue aims at broadening the debate on the importance of individual experiences in their entire diversity for environmental and climate ethics. It thereby links discourses and brings different traditions of philosophy into conversation with each other. This introduction provides a short

¹ Obviously, climate ethics also discusses questions of individual action, analyzing, for example, the climate responsibility of individuals (see the contributions in Voget-Kleschin/Garcia Portela/Baatz 2019). However, when individual duties are discussed in climate ethics, individual experiences and emotions mostly do not play a role.

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overview of the current state of the relevant discussions and presents the issue's seven texts.

Of all possible individual human experiences in natural environments, aesthetic experiences have been discussed most frequently. Let us begin with a short example: Imagine that a person is on a walk in a forest. They climb up a small hill. They see how the sunlight falls through the treetops. They pass a lake and hear an occasional splash. What might be the normative importance of such an aesthetic experience?² Important contributions to *environmental aesthetics* gave one prominent answer: Experiences like this might be crucial for living a good life. Thus, Arnold Berleant developed the concept of a *descriptive aesthetics* “to encourage the reader toward vivid aesthetic encounter” (Berleant 1992: 26). Martin Seel argues that an aesthetic attitude towards nature is an “important component of a successful conduct of life” (Seel 1991: 289, our translation). Angelika Krebs et al. go even further in claiming that aesthetic experiences of nature are not a superfluous luxury, but a necessary ingredient of a flourishing human life as they are important for dealing with existential experiences we all have to face, like experiences of illness, ageing, and death (Krebs et al. 2021: 109).

Within *environmental ethics*, these aesthetic experiences have been brought to fruition for arguments in favor of nature conservation and confident, rather strong, conceptions of sustainability (Ott 2010, Ott 2016). They are part of so-called eudaimonic arguments which highlight the relevance that natural entities or aspects of nature have for the good life of human beings and, therefore, emphasize nature's eudaimonic value. Since we owe moral consideration to the goods that constitute good lives, we should protect and preserve nature, which is valued by at least some people as, amongst others, an occasion for aesthetic experience. Another way to establish a connection between aesthetics, ethics, and ecology is Allen Carlson's conception of *positive aesthetics* according to which “the natural environment, insofar as it is untouched by man, has mainly positive aesthetic qualities” (2000: 72). Such a position, yet, has to answer the question of how the autonomy of the aesthetic can be preserved. As Holmes Rolston III pointed out, the road from beauty to duty can take very different forms, depending as well on the chosen aesthetic starting point as on the chosen ethical framework (Rolston 2002).

Aesthetic experiences of nature are also crucial for the *phenomenology of nature / eco-phenomenology*. Within this discipline, aesthetics is usually understood in the sense of the old Greek term *aisthesis* and thus refers to corporeal-sensual experiences, including all five senses as well as the corporeal condition of an individual (Böhme 2001). Aesthetic experiences of nature, often understood as experiences of atmospheres (Schmitz 1969, Böhme 1995, Griffero 2016), are one paradigmatic form of engagement between a human being and nature and the way the natural world shows up for human beings. Using amongst others the example of aesthetic experiences of nature, eco-phenomenologists analyze in what ways our experience of nature differs from that of other phenomena, but also whether such an account

² Of course, within contemporary environmental aesthetics the question of how such an experience should be conceptualized is discussed at length. We won't get into this discussion here as our thematic issue is focused on *ethical* questions.

can help us with going beyond shallow anthropocentrism (Toadvine/Brown 2003, Diaconu 2021, Meyer forthcoming). In this regard, eco-phenomenology and environmental ethics convene.

All strands of discussions mentioned so far, environmental aesthetics, environmental ethics, and eco-phenomenology, bring *emotions* into play. Kirsten Meyer, for example, emphasizes that familiarity with specific natural environments and repeated aesthetic encounters can lead to feelings of love, especially, if further personal memories are tied to these environments (Meyer 2003: 124-128). In recent years, the world public experienced some kind of an *emotional turn* in the debate on the climate crisis, as can be observed in Greta Thunberg's famous request: "I don't want you to be hopeful, I want you to panic!"³ Thus, it is not surprising that under the umbrella term *climate emotions*, a new and highly interdisciplinary strand of debate evolved. The reason for this is at hand: For more than thirty years, there has been no serious doubt in climate science about the anthropogenic causes of climate change. In these long decades, rational arguments, the reference to models, to established findings, and the sober exchange of reasons, seem to have made very little difference in political discourse. Therefore, the global climate movement has good reasons to test new ways of protest that use emotional strategies to draw attention to climate science's results and the whole cascade of problems the world has to face.

Likewise, recent contributions to environmental and climate ethics discuss the importance of different emotions and practices like grief and mourning (Cunsolo Willox 2012), fear (McQueen 2021), moral outrage (Antadze 2020) and—as well—hope (Williston 2012)⁴ for the relationship between human beings, other living beings and their natural surroundings and the role such emotions might play within processes and practices of community building and protest. Where these feelings are analyzed, the focus is on entirely different ways of experiencing nature than in the long-dominant debate about aesthetic experiences. It seems worthwhile to analyze whether these approaches with their extended perspectives on individual experiences and emotions might shed new light on the difficult motivation problem (Birnbacher 2009), on the question of how people can be motivated to change their behavior in the face of environmental and climate crises.

One important question for environmental and climate ethics concerns the relationship between individual experiences and emotions on the one hand and normative discourses centered on principles and values on the other hand. What is the importance of individual experiences and emotions when it comes to questions of justification? Can any connections at all be made between these two levels? One possible answer is to claim that experience, respectively descriptions based on experience, and evaluation go hand in hand. They are, as Ludwig Siep claims, "closely intertwined" (Siep 2022: 23; see Siep 2004). If we experience, for example, a certain natural environment as peaceful, harmonious, etc., judgments of value are most

³ Speech at the World Economic Forum at Davos, 25.01.2019, online available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjsLm5PCdVQ&t=143s>, min 2:23 (access: 2023/06/29).

⁴ Helpful overviews on current research on climate-related emotions in different disciplines can be found in Hasenfratz / Neckel (2021) and Pihkala (2022).



often included in our description of these experiences and can be points of departure for more general discussions on values and corresponding norms.

Another strategy might use the concept of the *lifeworld* as it has been developed with different characteristics in the traditions of phenomenology and discourse ethics. To mention only one example: In a recent study on practical reason, Julian Nida-Rümelin described the role of philosophy as follows: “Philosophy as theory of reason aims at continuity with lifeworld discourses via which philosophy again exerts influence on our lifeform.” He defends a practical philosophy “that ties in with and systematizes our shared practice of normative judgment. [...] We review and assess controversial normative beliefs and practices with reference to what, *between us*, are undisputed beliefs and practices.” (Nida-Rümelin 2023: 8). If we follow this line of thought, individual emotions and experiences are of crucial importance for any moral philosophy as they somehow are the basis material of our daily moral talk. Consequently, theories of norms and values in environmental and climate ethics should, in this view, seek continuity with everyday perspectives on nature, grounded in individual experiences.⁵ Such continuity will only be possible, if we, in the first step, analyze and understand the very different modes and relations between humans and nature in lifeworld contexts.

One might, as well, take a different approach and use individual experiences and emotions as starting points to develop an ethical framework that is not primarily focused on norms and values, but rather on virtues and vices. Thus, *environmental virtue ethics* has become an important tradition within environmental ethics, in which, as typical of virtue ethics, the individual and their character are at the center of the theory. For example, within this discourse, various new virtues relevant to the context of environmental and climate crises have been proposed.⁶

The strands of discussion addressed would undoubtedly benefit from being brought more systematically into conversation with each other, since separately, they traditionally encounter difficulties. Either they remain stuck on the descriptive level—as (eco-)phenomenological approaches are often accused of—or they neglect essential aspects of human existence, such as corporeality, as well as the everyday experiences of individuals caused by it. To do justice to the complexity of the ecological crises and associated challenges, it is necessary to foster interaction between philosophical traditions and debates that so far took little notice of each other. We believe that the combination of environmental aesthetics, environmental ethics in all its forms and eco-phenomenology is particularly promising as the texts collected in this thematic issue demonstrate.

Ludwig Siep, in his essay “Ethics, Science, and Everyday Experience in Discussions on Climate and Environmental Affairs” (*Ethik, Wissenschaft und Alltagserfahrung in den Klima- und Umweltdebatten*), values everyday experiences of individuals as a complement to scientific theories. He sees the task of philosophical ethics in making such everyday values conceptually explicit and in critically examining them. Current approaches to environmental ethics, which, among other things,

⁵ Everyday experiences within and perspectives on nature are primarily discussed within the ever-growing subdiscipline of *everyday aesthetics*. For an introduction to the field, see Saito (2021).

⁶ For overviews, see Hursthouse (2007) and Cafaro (2015).



focus on aesthetic and corporeal experiences of the nature of individuals and try to overcome the instrumentalization of nature, are presented by him as an important, although not yet sufficient step. In Siep's view, such positions lack the concept of intrinsic values within nature, values of nature that do not depend upon any reference to a human subject. He argues for extending the framework of ethics even more comprehensively to that of a possible "good world". Accordingly, human beings should not only be oriented to their good life but to the preservation of a possible good world. He develops a relational and holistic theory of values, which should serve as a basis for ethically assessing measures for dealing with the consequences of, for example, climate change.

Jens Soentgen, in his essay "Ecological Hospitality" (*Ökologische Gastfreundschaft*) also starts from everyday experiences, focusing on practices of giving shelter to and taking care of fellow animals, which he links to the theological-philosophical discourse on hospitality, including considerations from ecology and ethics. Soentgen analyzes accomplishable ("vollendbare") actions that relate to a definable ecological problem which can be solved by the means an individual (or a small group) possesses. Such actions are mostly overlooked in ethical discourses since they may seem too 'small' for theories interested in sustainability or the large-scale problems linked to climate change. Yet, following Soentgen, precisely these actions can serve as a model for the virtue of ecological hospitality. In times of ecological crises, many animals and plants lose their *oikos* and are thus in need of help and an alternative place to stay. Ecological hospitality can be understood as an active virtue rather than a duty. Thus, Soentgen's approach has a point of contact with environmental virtue ethics.

Another text connected to this tradition is Susana Cadilha's and Sofia Guedes Vaz's paper "Prospection as a Sustainability Virtue. Imagining Futures for Intergenerational Ethics". In their text, the authors propose prospection as a new and important sustainability virtue which is especially important in the context of intergenerational ethics. With prospection, Cadilha and Vaz denote the ability to think and care deeply about the future, navigate its inherent uncertainties constructively, and ensure the availability of sustainable options for future generations. Following the authors, developing this virtue can trigger good dispositions not only towards future humans but also towards non-humans and nature. Insofar as it is not only beneficial for other natural beings and entities, but also for the virtuous person's present life, Cadilha and Vaz claim that prospection is a morally charged virtue, including both cognitive and affective states and in need of our imaginative powers.

Two contributions to this thematic issue are related to the aforementioned debates on climate emotions and their importance for environmental and climate ethics. Harriët Bergman's paper "Anger in Response to Climate Breakdown" starts from the assumption that anger not only plays an important role in political debates and conflicts surrounding climate change and climate-related policies but that a certain form of anger can be an appropriate ground for climate activism. Bergman describes this form of anger as Lordean rage. Anger, in this view, demonstrates that people care about something. Lordean rage recognizes everyone's full humanity and is based on the belief that high standards of mutual coexistence are achievable. Lordean rage can be productive in the sense that it makes fundamental societal problems visible



and can, therefore, be a starting point for liberation. The concept of Lordean rage has been developed in the context of fighting racism. This context, as Bergman explains, remains important when it comes to the climate crisis: Lordean rage can be an appropriate ground for climate activism, especially in the Global North, as racial injustice and climate injustice are closely interwoven.

Ana Honnacker's paper "Why Mourning for Minks Matters. Rebellious Grief as Practice of Solidarity" focuses on a revealing example: In 2020, Danish authorities ordered the mass culling of all minks bred in the country as some scientific data indicated that the COVID-19 virus might be transmissible between minks and human beings. Reflecting on this case and relying, among others, on Judith Butler's work on mourning, Honnacker argues that the mass culling of minks sheds light on the way moral communities are constituted. For the question of whose life is valuable and whose life is not, the species boundary is not decisive. Rather, a society's cultural practices and ways of life determine whether certain animals are members of the moral community or not. A dog might be a member of the family and, therefore, a subject that can be mourned after its death. Animals "used" as "livestock" typically lack this moral quality of "grievability". Incidents like the mass culling of the Danish minks, however, can interrupt the normal order of differentiation between those beings that count from a moral point of view and those that do not count. Grief, as Honnacker claims, should therefore be understood as a rebellious practice: If we mourn those million mink lives lost in the mass culling, we actively challenge a society's moral order.

Two further contributions to this thematic issue deal with climate change and everyday experiences. In his paper "Climate Ethics and the Everyday Lifeworld", Johannes Müller-Salo argues that climate ethics, in discussing the problems of individual responsibility and individual motivation, has not sufficiently taken into account how many people in Western countries face the climate crisis in their ordinary lives. He uses the concept of the everyday lifeworld to demonstrate a problem: Within their everyday lifeworlds, many Western citizens cannot yet experience the climate crisis' consequences. The consequences they experience nowadays are most often catastrophes, which are, by definition, interruptions of the everyday. By contrast, the implementation of adequate and efficient climate policies has severe impacts on everyday lives. This mismatch, so Müller-Salo argues, partly explains why the problems of individual responsibility and motivation remain difficult to solve. In using the examples of aesthetic experiences and local policies, he sketches ways to address both problems from the perspective of the everyday lifeworld.

Konrad Ott takes a different perspective and argues that climate change can already be experienced by individuals. Yet, this is only one of four paradigms of eco-phenomenology which he discusses in his essay "Phenomenology of Nature Wants to be Practiced" (*Naturphänomenologie will betrieben werden*). Furthermore, Ott analyzes the attitude of *biophilia*, the promotion of health by contact with nature, as well as paradigms of deontic experiences with natural beings. With Theodor W. Adorno and against Husserl, Ott carves out that corporeal experiences are always mediated and have a tendency to be linguistically expressed and thus intersubjectively shared. He argues that eco-phenomenology should not be understood as a solipsistic approach where experiences are a kind of private property, but rather that it adds

up to the art of communicating these experiences with others. Ott sees the possibility that the validity dimension of such experiences is not restricted to sincerity, but also touches that of rightness, as he shows paradigmatically based on deontic experiences. However, the other discussed paradigms of eco-phenomenology have normative force, too: Biophilic inclinations are not only given to us corporeally but also given in the sense of an ethical mandate. Following Ott, the promotion of human health is part of the eudaimonic values of nature; and the experiences of climate change can be an impulse to develop corporeally mediated virtues in the fight against climate change.

As this brief overview illustrates, the texts collected here develop very different perspectives on the importance of individual experiences and emotions for environmental and climate ethics and their potential as a normative force. Likewise, they are rooted in different philosophical traditions. This variety mirrors the present thematic issue's main concern: Environmental and climate ethics can only do justice to the complex ecological crises of our time if they deal with the diverse experiences that people make in confronting these crises and the multilayered emotions that accompany such experiences. It is worth considering experiences and emotions from the perspective of different philosophical traditions and approaches. If this thematic issue can contribute to foster debates across established boundaries, it has achieved a major goal.

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