



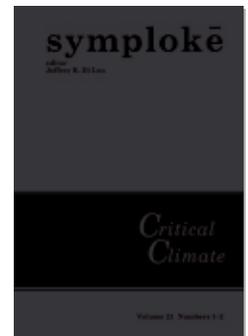
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ENVIRONMENTAL CARE ETHICS: NOTES TOWARD A NEW MATERIALIST CRITIQUE

ADELINE JOHNS-PUTRA

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

– The World Commission on Environment and Development
(1987, 43)

To scan the now ubiquitous definition put forward by the Brundtland Commission is to realize that our construction of “sustainability” is driven by a notion of care—care for the nonhuman environment enfolded with a concern for our human descendants. The rhetoric around our ideal response to climate change structures it as an ethical response. This essay proposes that, while so much of the ontology of the global ecological crisis called climate change has been closely interrogated, the ethics of care demanded in the name of that crisis has not been scrutinized in the same way. By “care,” I mean a feeling of concern for the wellbeing and needs of others; by “care ethics,” I mean an ethical position that takes this affective concern as its basis for action.¹ Given that environmental ethics—the question of human conduct and its effect on the human and nonhuman environment—is a profoundly ontological project, accounting as it must for the perceived ontological difference between the human and nonhuman, this lack of ontological scrutiny is conspicuous, to say the least.

This essay thus offers a theorization of the care ethics of climate change and sustainability. It considers this through the ontological project of new materialism, paying attention to the new materialist tendency to discuss ontology as agency, and being in terms of becoming. I propose that care

¹I acknowledge that there are nuanced differences in connotation when it comes to the word “care”: it could suggest an attitude of concern (“caring about”), an activity of looking after (“caring for”) or a burden and worry (as in the pluralized “cares”). In dealing with care ethics, which derive mainly from affect and attitude, I am interested mostly in “caring about.”

too has to be discerned as always becoming, that it is to be considered—to invoke Heidegger—not as ontic but as ontological. And yet, *pace* Heidegger, I suggest that, in an environmental ethics of care, care is more fruitfully thought of not as a condition for ontology (as in Heidegger's *Sorge*) but as itself deserving of ontological query. Care is not the means by which agency occurs; it is itself agential.

New Materialism

The new materialism that has invigorated environmental criticism, and that has been particularly important for the project of critical climate change, is a reconsideration and re-acknowledgement of the material properties of human co-existence with the human and nonhuman. In other words, new materialists accept the fact (or what Heidegger would call the facticity) of being in order to interrogate it.² Formulations such as the “agential realism” of Karen Barad and the “speculative materialism” of Quentin Meillassoux, both now identifiable with a “new materialism” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012) or “new ontology” (Hekman 2008, 109), have challenged the linguistic or social constructivism that tended to dominate critical theory after post-structuralism. New materialists have borrowed much from Bruno Latour's description (1993) of our modern habit of dividing the world into the realms of subjects, objects, language and history—when, really, we should be thinking of quasi-objects, quasi-subjects, and even discourses—and his identification of such units as actants, agents that constantly translate, mediate, and play roles. One should also note that new materialism's re-considerations of human and nonhuman ontology as a question of agency are recognizably indebted to the theories of identity performativity of Donna Haraway and Judith Butler. But what has really invigorated new materialism is Latour's famous pronouncement, a kind of *volte face*, in 2004, that his actor-network theory and the Science and Technology Studies (S&TS) inspired in large part by it had mistakenly rejected “matters of fact” outright, in its valiant attempt at simply redefining them. Latour called instead for a “second empiricism, [a] return to the realist attitude” (2004, 246). A need for a new empiricism is the emerging context for new materialism, a new concern with the fact or facticity of materiality and of being.

The key thinker in this regard is Barad, whose interest in ontological questions of agency stems from a refusal to accept entities as either static or ontic. She stringently critiques what she calls representationalism, the deeply entrenched assumption that there are “two distinct and independent kinds of entities—representations, and entities to be represented” (2003, 804).³ For

²For Heidegger, facticity is the factual nature of the fact of existence: “The factuality of the fact Da-sein, as the way in which every Da-sein actually is, we call its *facticity*” (1996, 56).

³See also Barad (2007), especially Chapters 3, 4 and 7.

Barad, following physicist Niels Bohr, the “primary epistemological unit” is not the object or entity waiting to be represented but “*phenomena*” (815), that is, the constellation of components acting on, in, with or through each other. For Barad, ontology is a question of “*the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting ‘components’*” (815). It is, then, not interaction between objects that matters, but “intra-action,” the process by which objects become—momentarily and locally—separate and thereby knowable: “It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful” (815). Such “intra-actions enact *agential separability*” (815). What is especially significant in Barad’s “agential realism” for an environmental ethics is the radical, dynamic and local quality it imparts to ontology. It reminds us that apprehension and identification of the other occurs not in static opposition but in a dynamic coming together and enactment of separability, the so-called “*agential cut*” (815). Importantly, as we shall see later, for Barad, the phenomena that intra-act in this way are not simply human and nonhuman others, but material-discursive practices (818). They should be thought of not as things ontically given, but as things materially and discursively fabricated. Indeed, objects only ever come to be in a relational, intra-active process.

Thus, it is not just that human and nonhuman objects become meaningful to me because *I* recognize *them*. (Such, for Meillassoux, is the mistake of “correlationism” [2008, 5-9]).⁴ It is also that *I* too enter into ontological significance in acts of encounter with and recognition of others. New materialism insists, then, on the equal claims of human subjects and human or nonhuman objects to ontological significance, and it is here that we have to consider the sister project of “object-oriented ontology.” The term was first posited by Graham Harman and then taken up in an environmental context by Timothy Morton to develop his notion of hyperobjects, that is, objects that exist on such unthinkable temporal and spatial scales that they challenge the idea of a subjectivity capable of comprehending them (2011). Object-oriented ontology, like Meillassoux’s speculative materialism and Barad’s agential realism, decenters (human) subjectivity. However, where Morton’s theories differ crucially from Barad’s is in Morton’s implicit querying of the immediacy and locality of encounter that, for Barad, defines her conceptualization of ontology as agency. Morton, often concerned with the limit-case phenomena of hyperobjects, asserts that interobjectivity (more or less congruent with “intra-action”) can occur across unthinkably large scales of time and space (2010, 130-31).⁵ Hence, objects are always partially withdrawn even as they

⁴Thus, Meillassoux, read alongside Barad, offers an important reminder that the dynamic of intra-action, with its paradigm of objects and others in becoming, is more than a simple embrace of contingency. It is an acknowledgement of the necessity of contingency as the ground by which all is rendered meaningful.

⁵See also Morton’s essay, “Poisoned Ground: Art and Philosophy in the Time of Hyperobjects” in this issue, in which he states, for example, “Every event is a kind of inscription

are apprehended. There is something to these objects that can never be known. Further, although Morton takes for granted that such objects are, as it were, intra-actively constituted, he warns against “relationism,” the assumption that “objects are nothing more than the sum of their relations with other objects” (2011, 184). In my reading, then, the difference between Barad’s and Morton’s formulations of agency and ontology is a matter of emphasis: Morton is interested in *objects* in motion; Barad is concerned with objects in *motion*. Despite this difference, however, Barad and Morton, when considered alongside each other, offer a crucial insight to anyone concerned with human and nonhuman relations in a time of climate change. New materialism and object-oriented ontology together foreground the way in which ontology is about becoming as much as it is about being.

Such a reformulation of human ontology and agency is of particular interest to an investigation of care and its implications for an ethical positioning of the human. Yet, while I acknowledge the significance of an object-oriented ontology for rethinking the one-sided anthropocentrism that characterizes correlationism, I wonder too if object-oriented ontology has distracted us from considerations of environmental care ethics. The decentering impulse of object-oriented ontology shies away from any interrogation of the effect of the human object (let’s not even say “subject”) on other objects. New materialism and object-oriented ontology easily mistake a consideration of *human* agency and ontology for the old-fashioned, outdated investment in subjectivity that is correlationism. Hence a new materialist critique of environmental care ethics – of the affective considerations that shape human conduct and its impact on humans and nonhumans now and in the future – has not yet been undertaken.⁶

Environmental Care Ethics

In approaching care ethics, one must briefly take account of the late twentieth-century cultural-feminist notion of the “ethic of care” and its impact on ecofeminist thought and practice. An alternative female ethic was first proposed by Carol Gilligan (1982): her wide-ranging study of the bases for women’s moral responses built on psychoanalytical object-relations theory, and showed how women are continually psychologically conditioned to care, as girls, as wives and, most of all, as mothers. Gilligan’s work, in conjunction with that of Nel Noddings (1984), came to be widely acknowledged as an alternative, female-derived set of normative ethics, and is one of the most enduring legacies of second-wave feminism. It was taken up by ecofeminist

in which one object leaves its footprint in another one. Interobjective reality is just the sum total of all these footprints, crisscrossing everywhere. This sum total is nonlocal by definition.”

⁶Barad (2007, 391-96) discusses the “ethics of mattering,” not in relation to care but in relation to a Levinasian mode of “responsibility.”

thinkers as the basis for an environmental and explicitly feminist ethics. The most sustained versions of ecofeminist care ethics are Carolyn Merchant's "earthcare" (1996) and Merchant's (1980) and Val Plumwood's critiques of reason/nature dualism; nonetheless, the identification and promotion of a gendered care ethics is widespread and may be found at both ends of the spectrum of ecofeminist thought, from the spiritual (for example, Charlene Spretnak) to the standpoint or political (for example, Ariel Salleh and Mary Mellor).

The viability of care as an ethical model has come under intense interrogation in the past decade. One of the first extensive critiques, made by Joan C. Tronto, queried the assumption that private human relations could so easily translate into a political model of action. Tronto points out, among other things, that parochialism and paternalism rank as the "two primary dangers of care as a political ideal" (1993, 170). Put another way, what is often overlooked is the way in which caring-about something or someone (a) implies not-caring-about others and (b) risks caring-too-much. The problems with a specifically ecofeminist ethics of care have subsequently been dealt with by Chris J. Cuomo, Catriona Sandilands, and Sherilyn MacGregor. All three echo Tronto when they identify the emotional power-plays that can characterize care in intimate or familial relationships—self-sacrifice, self-victimization, guilt, resentment, powerlessness; they further warn of the consequences of amplifying these in a political mode. In other words, if we fail to take stock of their emotional baggage, then the highly personal and affective dynamics at the heart of such ecofeminist care ethic systems as "motherhood environmentalism" (Sandilands 1999, 4) and "ecomaternalism" (MacGregor 2006, 20) offer a far from ideal model for citizenship. Cuomo, Sandilands and MacGregor insist care ethics must relentlessly contextualize. It must always ask: who does the caring and who or what is cared for; who gets to make these decisions; what models of human-to-human care are we invoking in the process (friendship, kinship, marriage, parenthood, and so on); and what are the gender dynamics of our models of care?

A new materialist approach enhances these earlier critiques; that is to say, it reveals that the reasons for a vigilant contextualization of care are profoundly ontological. In short, care has to be recognized as intra-active: carer and cared-about are identities formed in a dynamic of agential separability. These entities come to be, that is, they come to matter, in the very terms of the encounter. They are not, therefore, ontic, stable subjects or objects.

There are several corollaries of understanding care as intra-active that I can think of for environmental care ethics. *First, different objects of care demand different kinds of care: put another way, there are different attitudes of care to be adopted depending on what or who is cared about.* To borrow Morton's terms, objects of care are profoundly withdrawn, i.e., not wholly knowable, and so we must consider that some are more withdrawn than others. I think I know and care about my stepchildren or about the grass in the back garden in a

way that is very different from how I understand and care about a climate-changed planet. All are strange strangers in their way but such differing levels of strangeness invite very different care responses from me. This may all seem blindingly obvious but has been surprisingly little recognized in environmental care ethics, which tends to efface with astonishing ease the distinction between what it means to care about humans and what it means to care about the nonhuman environment. Take, for example, Merchant's earthcare, which she defines as a "partnership ethic" that "means that both women and men can enter into mutual relationships with each other and the planet independently of gender" (1996, 216). The implication here that a human other and the (nonhuman?) planet present themselves as potential partners on the same terms must be scanned. To what extent can one's relationship with another human be compared to one's relationship with the planet, invoked monolithically? The relative incomprehensibility of the nonhuman *apropos* the human must be acknowledged; it cannot be waved away as some fault of the human for not being perceptive enough to "hear" the "voice" of "nature." This is not to say that human-to-human communications are ever unmediated. But it is to say that human-to-nonhuman communication is necessarily mediated by the human. As soon as we enter into environmentalist discourse, we make the nonhuman speak *for* us, in our willing it to speak *to* us. As Sandilands reminds us, environmentalism is impossible without the "subjectivation" (1999, 80) of the environment, without rendering nature the subject of our making.⁷ Inevitably, our care response to any nonhuman phenomena runs in tandem with this subjectivating impulse.

It is not just that we must consider cautiously the difference between humans and non-humans as recipients of care. To return to the Brundtland definition, we can see that notions of sustainable care elide what it means to care about humans and nonhumans today with what it means to care about humans tomorrow. Here, it is worth taking a leaf out of the book of green political theory, even though it tends to eschew affective ethics in favor of non-affective notions of justice. Writing in the 1990s, John Barry and Avner de-Shalit recognize that the moral obligations that citizens of the present grant to citizens of the future cannot be reciprocated. Barry imagines a constitutionally-enshrined "ecological contract" that would "consider both non-humans and future human descendants 'moral subjects' (worthy of moral consideration but not morally responsible agents)" (1996, 122). De-Shalit proposes a "'communitarian' theory of intergenerational justice" (1995, 12), discussing the obligations that link what he calls a "transgenerational community" (13-50), but stipulating that these obligations fade for future generations remote in time because of a diminishing "moral similarity" (58, 62-65). In other words, my step-children's children's children (or rather *the*

⁷See Sandilands (1999, 88): "The nature that we may find in ecological searches for a subject is always a construction of that Other from the point at which we appear to ourselves as natural or natured, not nature itself."

thought of my step-children's children's children) may evoke a care response from me, but they are strange strangers indeed.

A second corollary of understanding care as intra-active: it is not just that different objects of care demand different kinds of care responses, but *any given object of care will not demand, invite or request a single uniform or absolute or continuous kind of care response*. As Morton would have it, objects withdraw at different speeds. Thus, differing levels of strangeness from the same apparent object invite different care responses at different times. In this regard, I confess that my teenaged step-children are a very apt example, but the shifting parameters of our knowledge about the Higgs boson or Hurricane Sandy make these just as appropriate. As Barad puts it, referring here not to caring but to responding, "Different material intra-actions produce different materializations of the world, and hence there are specific stakes in how responsiveness is enacted" (2007, 380).

Now, a third correlative: if care can no longer be thought of as constant and predictable in quality and quantity even with regard to the same object or phenomenon, given the momentary nature of agential matter, *then the identity of carer can no longer be assumed to be premised on a stable or specific amount of care*. It is no good saying "I care about the planet" or "I care about you" or, worse still, "I care" or, even worse still, "women care," without thinking about how that agency is contingent on the care response, and how, further, that care response is also contingent. This kind of recourse to care as conferring some kind of grand subjecthood or, indeed, as granting some but not others a privileged relationship to nonhuman phenomena and objects lies at the heart of the identity politics of ecofeminism. It bespeaks, at the very least, an epistemological laziness.

A New Materialist Care Ethics

However, there is more to a new materialist care ethics, an intra-active dynamic of care, than this. We have to consider now the possibility—a seemingly logical conclusion, given what I have been arguing—that care is the mode by which objects are known. After all, our apprehension of those objects is inevitably shaped by caring. When, say, we purport to care about the environment, from that point on we know it as this thing that *we* care about and it is defined in relation to us. More significantly, it may even be impossible to tell at what point knowing becomes caring, or indeed if there is such a point at all. As soon as something is apprehended it is cared about in some way, inasmuch as it evokes a response that is unavoidably affective, even if this amounts to feeling that one doesn't feel very much at all. This conceptualization of caring as knowing comes close to Heidegger's

theorization of “care” as *Sorge* (literally, “worry” or “care”) (1996, 180-230).⁸ *Sorge* is the very ground of our becoming, the structure by which humans comprehend their unique ontological state, comprised of existence, thrownness, and fallen-ness. These three terms refer (more or less respectively) to: humans’ understanding of our existence and the possibilities this opens up; the fact (or, more accurately, facticity) of our existence; and our giving away of self as we engage with others. Care as *Sorge* refers to the pre-ontological totality of these complex negotiations of being, being-in-the-world and being with others – it is “ontologically prior to the phenomena” of “willing and wishing or urge and predilection” (Heidegger 1996, 194) – and it is therefore akin to a theorization of care as a condition for intra-action. However, Heidegger’s notion of care could do with a further new materialist reworking (and not just because of its anthropocentric focus), as, indeed, could any argument that care is the ground on which the phenomenal enactments of agential separability occur.

A truly workable new materialist vision of care would recognize that what we think of as the world about which we care is a collection of intra-active units – or what Latour (1987, 2005) would call actants. The dynamic of carer and cared-about that I have described thus far is more fruitfully thought of in terms of constellations of intra-actions (Barad), or a network (Latour), or a mesh (Morton) of objects. These all have agency and identity as they come together or, more accurately, they have agency and identity *in* their coming together. However, as Barad reminds us, those units are not just the familiar human or nonhuman actors but the discursive units and material units that make up our understanding of the world – her phenomena are made up of “material-discursive practices through which boundaries are constituted” (2003, 818). To illustrate how Barad’s anti-representationalism works in the context of care, I offer a somewhat childish – and therefore, I hope, useful – example: think about your knowledge or apprehension of the thing called the Tyrannosaurus Rex. Your Tyrannosaurus Rex is necessarily the product of a text, probably a popular cultural one (*Jurassic Park* or *Calvin and Hobbes* or perhaps Willis O’Brien’s awesome early stop motion films). No doubt it also emerges from various bits of trivia, the extent of which depends on how much you were interested in (or *cared* about) dinosaurs as a child or, indeed, whether you have any professional paleontological knowledge as an adult. It isn’t just the case that the Tyrannosaurus Rex pre-exists the text through which you know it and has been merely represented in it. The Tyrannosaurus Rex as you know it is the product of the intra-action of different but no less real discursive and material units, that is, the mediatory and translatory effect of these actants on and through one other. Those units include not merely those discursive phenomena that you encountered and continue to encounter (the novels, the films, the textbooks, Wikipedia entries) and not merely the material concerns that surround your encounters, from the DVDs and/or

⁸For a useful elucidation, see King (2001, 35-40).

television you watch to the computer you use to the books you read. They include too the discursive-material hybridity that is the shared understanding of cultural connotations enabling your reading or viewing. This consists of, among other things, the prior expectations that allow you to make sense of the very act of reading, what the book or DVD looked like as you picked it up, even the assumption—made by you, the director, the studio, and the entire film distribution network—that a “film” is worth spending any time or money on at all. Finally, the care, in all its complexity, that you exerted on finding out about the Tyrannosaurus Rex is as important a component of this understanding as any aspect of genre, form or material context. Importantly, then, it is not just the naïve representationalist relationship of you and the Tyrannosaurus Rex that should come under scrutiny here, but the galaxy of intra-active units that contributes to what we think of as its representation. Among these units is care (as well as the intra-active units that comprise care). If we replace the example of the Tyrannosaurus Rex with “the planet” or “nature” or “climate change,” we see the representationalist fallacy committed in the name of environmental care ethics and discern the need to rethink care into an intricate web.

Care, then, is best construed not as the ground or even the vector for intra-action, but as itself a unit involved in intra-action. As I suggested earlier, to assert, “I care,” as a claim to identity is to disregard how the agency of caring is contingent on the level and quality of caring, and how that caring is always contextualized. As units involved in a network of shifting identities, the “carer,” the “caring” and the “cared-about” as well as “care” itself all exhibit similar ontological qualities. Care—the emotional affective phenomenon or the apparently rational ethical response—is in no way deserving of special integrity or immanence as a pre-ontological condition. When Morton, following Harman, proposes “sincerity” as a kind of meta-awareness with which to greet hyperobjects, this seems to allocate to affective and ethical response an ontic property.⁹ But where would the ground for such sincerity come from? How is it given? If we as new materialists are to grasp the nature of being, we have to think about how any one “position” of sincerity, like one of care, is inhabited as a momentary stance.

This is not simply a reconsideration of care; it entails no less than a rethinking of what we mean by ethics and by ethical systems. But neither is this an apologia for unethical behavior, where such connotes an outright rejection of conscience. This fear of the fall from conscience is what motivates Latour’s restatement of empiricism in 2004. Yet, the constant weighing up of agency and ontology required in an effort to do right by all the others in the mesh—akin to Ray Brassier’s regarding of nihilism as “not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity” (2007, xi)—actually takes a tremendous amount of conscientious behavior. As I have said elsewhere,

⁹See Morton’s “Poisoned Ground: Art and Philosophy in the Time of Hyperobjects,” in this issue.

perhaps the word “thoughtful,” in both senses of the word, is a handy modifier for “care,” as it nicely gestures toward the kind of considerate and considered set of responses being proposed here, and the attention that needs to be paid to the inevitable ebbs and flows of care.¹⁰

Such attention to the agential fluidity of care brings into plain sight the traps of guilt and resentment into which advocates of environmental care ethics often fall. Claims tend to get made for some being able to care about the environment more than others (think not just of ecofeminism but of the fetishizing of indigenous belief and ritual in certain ecocritical quarters, which disturbingly evokes the naïveté of eighteenth-century “noble savage” rhetoric). Or anxieties circulate about how equitable we are in doling out care, whether some are indeed more deserving of care than others (in debates over the advantages and disadvantages of our affective relationships with charismatic mega-fauna, for example). Better to imagine, surely, that the diverse elements of our (human and nonhuman) environments include all the ratiocinative or affective responses that we label as thoughts and feelings, rather than emanating from or existing somehow subject to them. Care is part of the discursive and material mesh from which objects emerge. Care—in the act of being named and purportedly exercised—emerges from and re-submerges into that mesh.

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¹⁰See Johns-Putra (forthcoming).

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