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Ethics Beyond Sentience

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ETHICS BEYOND SENTIENCE

To whom—or what—do we owe basic acknowledgment, respect, and consideration? To whom—or what—do we have those basic obligations? These are the questions I wish to probe in this essay. They are questions that can seem to require the drawing of lines, the identification of criteria that make some beings “morally considerable” while other beings do not warrant this kind of special moral attention. Such questions have received a great deal of attention from moral philosophers, and have generated many very different responses, ranging from views that regard human beings as sole possessors of this special property of moral considerability to views that attribute this feature to every corner of existence. Views of the latter sort will strike some as silly—overly romantic perhaps, and because of this, largely impractical. I am nevertheless often attracted to such views for the potential power they have to stimulate moral imagination.

Such views ask us to move beyond human-centered ways of thinking about ethics and obligations, to see our responsibilities extending beyond the effects of our actions on our fellow humans. Other ethical frameworks make similar demands, in particular the theories of animal welfare advocates such as Peter Singer, who shared his views at Eastern Kentucky University during the 2010-2011 Chautauqua Lecture Series.¹ However, there are crucial differences in the kind of outlook I favor and the approach advocated by Singer and others, such as Jonathan Balcombe (another speaker in the 2010-2011 series). For them, as Balcombe puts it, “Sentience is the bedrock of ethics.”² That is, sentience—the ability to experience pain, pleasure, and perhaps other conscious states—is the fundamental feature that makes a being morally considerable. In summary, if a being can suffer, then it can be wronged, and we have obligations not to cause unnecessary suffering in any sentient being. As Singer points out, this has radical implications for many common practices, such as the intensive rearing and slaughter of animals for food. By contrast, the outlook I favor is in some ways even more radical than

1 See Singer’s essay in this volume, “Ethics and Animals: Extending Ethics beyond Our Species.”

2 See Balcombe’s essay in this volume, “Lessons from Animal Sentience: Towards a New Humanity.”

their approach—not because I am prepared to make even more radical practical demands than Singer, but rather because it requires, as I will suggest in the end, a certain resistance to the search for a final criterion of moral consideration. It requires us to keep our eyes open and our imaginations alive to new possibilities, different ways of thinking about our moral obligations which make no sense if we settle for the view that the possession of sentience is the basis of ethics and moral obligation. While sentience is a morally significant feature, it fails to capture everything of moral significance in *both* the human and the non-human world.

I. What about Little Brother?

In the chilling short story, “Little Brother,” Mary Mann offers a glimpse of a poor family named Hodd. The mother has just given birth to her thirteenth child, stillborn. The narrator, coming to visit Mrs. Hodd and to bring flowers for the child’s burial, asks Mrs. Hodd to see the child, and discovers that while the mother was confined to the bed, two of the other children had been playing dress up with the dead child.

Evangeline and Randolph pushed their grubby fingers into the open mouth, and tried to force them into the sunken eyes, in order to raise the lids.

“Wake up! Wake up, ikcle brudder!” they said.

When I had rescued the desecrated body, and borne it to its poor bier in the mother’s room, I spoke a word to Mrs. Hodd which she resented.

“Time is long for sech little uns, when t’ others ’re at school and I’m laid by,” she said. “Other folkes’ child’en have a toy, now and then, to kape ’em out o’ mischief. My little uns han’t. He’ve kep’ ’em quite [quiet] for hours, the po’r baby have; and I’ll lay a crown they han’t done no harm to their little brother.”³

³ In *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories*, ed. A.S. Byatt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 96. The story was originally written in the 1890s.

One might well wonder what “word” the narrator might have spoken to Mrs. Hodd on this occasion. Would one say that what the children had done was *wrong*? That Mrs. Hodd, in allowing them to dress up little brother, had done something *wrong*? That basic term of moral evaluation, “wrong,” seems a bit paltry here. Indeed, to be a witness to such a scene might well leave one speechless and inclined to agree with Cora Diamond’s assessment of the story: “Moral thought gets no grip here.”⁴ No doubt something has gone wrong, but what has gone wrong is confounding, ghastly—something we might regard as unthinkable has come to pass, and we readers are thrust into the thinking of it.

Although Cora Diamond suggests that the horror depicted in “Little Brother” goes in some ways beyond the grip of ordinary moral concepts, it would seem strange to suggest that the story has *nothing* to do with morality and ethics (terms I will use interchangeably here). Even if it is paltry to say that playing dress-up with little brother is wrong, we might decrease that paltriness with an onslaught of emphatics: that it is *obviously, utterly, certainly, absolutely* (and so on) wrong. It’s something that’s *so* wrong that we would never even think that its wrongness needs mentioning. This is one way of articulating what it means to call such a horror *unthinkable*: it shouldn’t even seem like an *option* that one might let the “little uns” keep quiet by playing with dead little brother.

But now we have to notice something strange about the alleged axiom that sentience is the foundation of ethics. Poor Mrs. Hodd is quite right to wager that the other children “han’t done no harm to their little brother.” Since little brother is dead, this is a bet she can’t lose if sentience is the foundation of ethics. On that view, little brother *can’t* be harmed, *because little brother isn’t sentient*. No amount of poking or prodding can harm him now.

II. Beyond Sentience: Respect for the Dead

Peter Singer writes:

If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being,

⁴ Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” in Cavell et al., *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 64.

the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with like suffering—in so far as rough comparisons can be made—of any other being. *If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account. This is why the limit of sentience... is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others.*⁵

I am in general agreement with Singer's basic claims about the moral relevance of suffering, regardless of whether one is a human, a cow, or a bear, etc., and none of what I write here should be taken as a challenge to the moral relevance of suffering, in whomever it might occur. What concerns me, and what I find essentially indefensible, is the manner in which Singer *excludes from the field of moral consideration* those beings and matters which do not have some tidy localization in the experiences of a sentient being. Indeed, the final sentence of the passage quoted above suggests that morality is exclusively concerned with the drawing up of principles to guide our conduct as it affects *interests*. That is, for Singer (and others) the language of right and wrong maps onto the enhancement and frustration of sentient interests. Anything which lacks sentience can have no interests, and so cannot be wronged (or treated in ways that are morally right).

Some will challenge Singer's view on the grounds that having interests requires *more* than basic sentient capacities—it requires the possession of concepts (or language) or some other higher cognitive capacity.⁶ But as I said above, I am in basic agreement with Singer that one needn't be an intellectual being in order to have interests; indeed, one needn't have the concept of an *interest*, or know what one's interests are, in order to have interests. In this respect, Jeremy Bentham was right to suggest that lacking the ability to talk or reason does not remove the significance of one's capacity for suffering. Surely no one thinks it is less wrong to cause suffering in a mentally disabled human being than in a mentally mature human. In some contexts, we might even think that inflicting suffering on a mentally disabled person is *worse*, insofar as such treatment

⁵ Peter Singer, "All Animals Are Equal," *Philosophical Exchange*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (1974), excerpt reprinted in Andrew Linzey and Paul Barry Clarke, eds., *Animal Rights: A Historical Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 162-167. Emphasis added.

⁶ See, for example, R.G. Frey, "Rights, Interests, Desires, and Beliefs," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (1979), 233-239. Frey argues that animals cannot properly be said to have desires or beliefs because these require the possession of language.

violates our sense that might does not make right, and that we have special ethical obligations to protect the weak from abuse.

My challenge to Singer, and to others who claim that the possession of sentience is what makes one a “morally considerable” being, goes in quite the opposite direction of those who would claim that sentience alone is not enough. Some would press this challenge by arguing that non-sentient beings can have interests, too; water, minerals, and sunlight are good for a plant, and so a plant has an interest in obtaining sufficient water, minerals, and sunlight. A plant’s “best interests” would simply be those things that make life go best for the plant. Such a position, sufficiently worked out, would suggest that all living things have interests because all living things can either flourish or wither and perish. The upshot of such a view might be that all living things deserve some basic respect, an idea that is powerfully articulated in the writings of Albert Schweitzer.⁷ Such an ethic raises innumerable practical questions that some will think are silly—how should we treat plants and the like?—but the basic idea seems clear enough: life, in all its forms, is an awesome thing, and something upon which we ought not to trample thoughtlessly. A plant surely feels no pain, but that doesn’t remove my conviction that a person who smashes a plant for no good reason (except his or her own grim satisfaction) is doing something morally troubling.⁸

I said that some who wish to challenge the drawing of moral lines at the boundary of sentience—in the interest of casting a wider moral net—will take the approach above. I have only sketched such an approach because although I believe that any effort to expand our sense of respect—that is, to expand our sense of that which we can treat or fail to treat with respect—is headed in the right direction, I think that drawing a line at the boundary of life turns out to be just as arbitrary. To some, this will seem radical. (Indeed, many find the calls of Singer to include animals in the morally considerable community

⁷ See Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), esp. Part II: *Civilization and Ethics*, Ch. 26.; for a similar argument, see Kenneth Goodpaster, “On Being Morally Considerable,” *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 75, No. 6 (1978), 308-325.

⁸ Richard Sylvan’s “last man” example asks us to meditate on the question of whether, were the human population to die off except for a lone remaining man, the “last man” would be doing anything wrong if he chose to lay waste to the environment, destroying everything that he could. Sylvan assumes that most of us would find this troubling. “Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic?” in Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology* (London: Blackwell, 2003), 47-52. (Originally published in 1973.)

already too radical!) In response, I would suggest that an ethic of sentience, or even an ethic of reverence for life, draws the moral line too narrowly, and that these theories do so in a way that already conflicts with aspects of ordinary human morality.⁹ We can see this problem clearly if we recall the dead child in Mann's "Little Brother"—the sentience and the life in that little body are gone, and so if our ethic demands consideration only for the sentient, or the living, then there is nothing left in little brother that demands consideration or respect.

Cultures have various ways of showing respect for the dead. In our culture, modes of respect for the dead make such things as eating them or throwing their corpses out on the compost heap seem utterly horrific. The specific modes of respect for the dead are to some extent conventional, and they depend upon various aspects of our myths and metaphysics. *We* don't believe that eating the dead counts as a way of respecting them in our society; we show the dead respect by giving them a burial or by cremating them. But here, we can recall Herodotus' tale, in his *Histories*, of the Callatians, who *did* eat their dead, and who regarded the prospect of cremating the dead as something so horrible that they would not do so in exchange for any amount of money or goods. Whatever our particular mode of respect, what are we to make of our outrage when our dead are not properly respected? What is the nature of the wrong that has occurred? Who has been harmed by failures of respect, by the desecration, say, of little brother's body?

One response is that the people who loved the now-dead person are harmed by the desecration of the corpse; the disrespectful treatment of that corpse distresses them. But *why* should anyone be distressed about what is done to a corpse? It doesn't feel anything, and it isn't alive. So what is it that *justifies* the distress of the living?

Another response is that the ill treatment of corpses is bad for (i.e. harms) those who do the desecrating. For example, one might argue that people who do certain things to corpses (disfigure them for sheer delight, etc.) will be more likely to do bad things to living persons as well. (Kant argued similarly that people should be kind to animals, not because kindness is morally owed to animals themselves, but only because "he who is

⁹ I do not mean here to suggest that there is a universal human morality, but rather that we can find instances in the many human moral systems of moral ideas that don't depend—and *needn't* depend—upon reference to the benefits and harms that accrue to sentient beings.

cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men.”¹⁰) This is an empirical claim that we could investigate. Suppose it turned out that people who disfigure corpses for fun are *not* more likely to do terrible things to living persons (or animals). Would that set our minds at ease? I suspect not, and this is because we think that the being which has been wronged is the corpse (or perhaps, the person who is now represented by the remaining corpse).

So we are left with the thought that if there is something wrong with desecrating corpses, it has something to do with the corpse itself—and not simply how this action makes others feel, or how this action affects those who perform it. That is, we seem left with the thought that corpses themselves are owed some kind of respect. And yet those committed to a picture on which a being can only be wronged if it can suffer (or, if it is alive) will not be able to countenance this claim. It might be suggested that the respect owed to a corpse is an extension of the respect owed to the individual who once inhabited (or was) that corpse. We could frame this in terms of a property relationship: the corpse is the property of the deceased, and so we should treat it the way the deceased person wanted their remains to be treated. Desecrating a corpse would then be a case of damaging someone else’s possessions, and the disrespect done is to the owner of that property. But even this solution, which some might find attractive, leaves puzzles unsolved. A dead person cannot suffer (the fires of hell, perhaps, aside), and so cannot get upset if his or her wishes are not honored. Even if this works in some cases, it would not really work in the case of little brother, who presumably had no wishes about the treatment of his corpse, and for those who are indifferent about how their corpse is treated. Beyond that, I find the analogy between corpses and property troubling, for even if we say things like, “He’s in heaven now,” when we *look* at the corpse, we (or at least I) still also see the person in that motionless body. The person remains present in—or, we might say, *represented by*—his or her remains, is still there to be respected or disrespected, even if none of this can be experienced by the deceased. If being treated without respect is a way of being harmed, and the desecration of a corpse is disrespectful (say: it disrespects the memory of the deceased), then the dead can be harmed.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* [1780-1], trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 239-241.

Enough of death and corpses. I began with this example in order to bring into focus the idea that duties of respect can be, and *are*, extended beyond the boundary of sentience (and of life). One might say that the dead are a special case, precisely because they used to be sentient. At this point, I might turn to non-sentient living beings such as plants, and show, on the basis of the earlier sketch offered above, that we can see them, too, as worthy of consideration and respect. But since I suggested that my case for consideration and respect goes beyond the boundaries of both sentience and life (at least as we normally think of life as an internal feature of a discrete organism), let me now turn to a different sort of example.

III. Thinking like a Mountain

Throughout the Appalachian region, coal companies are engaged in a mining process known as “mountaintop removal.” Layers (seams) of coal are extracted by blasting away the surface of mountains, bulldozing the rubble out of the way, and then harvesting the exposed seams of coal. These mined areas are then “reclaimed” by restoring a layer of topsoil to the mined area and planting various trees and other vegetation so that, in time, the area will again look to the innocent eye to be a flourishing natural area. In some cases, species such as elk have been reintroduced into regions where populations had vanished, and these new animal populations (as well as the hunting industry they support) are thriving.

For some, successful reclamation absolves the coal companies of what would otherwise seem like a crime against nature. In invoking that idea of a crime against nature, I’m talking about not just the uprooted flora and fauna, but also the mountains themselves. Others feel that mountaintop removal is one of the worst expressions of anthropocentrism—the attitude that the earth and its bounty are ours for the taking, and that we may do to the natural world whatever we please. Some opponents of this human-centered ethic hold that no amount of reclamation can justify the leveling (viz. the flattening) of a mountain. Robert Elliot, for example, has suggested that “faking nature” can never provide an adequate replacement for that which is destroyed by our extractive

enterprises—even if, he argues, the “faked” nature appears to be identical to the original.¹¹

The thought behind the reaction of those who are appalled by mountaintop removal is that there is something about the Appalachian Mountains that should stop us short of viewing them as mere resources to be blasted to bits and sifted for useful materials.¹² Those who have spent time in such regions will know for themselves the sort of feeling that underwrites this moment of pause. It is, among other things, the feeling of being in the presence of something larger than oneself, of being dwarfed by the vastness of the mountains, of the earth itself. This may leave us feeling astonished, awed, inspired, and perhaps humbled. All of these experiences renew us and (I believe) improve us. One might say that this shows that the mountains are as much a spiritual resource as they are a material resource.

I can imagine someone (perhaps myself in the appropriate frame of mind), in the midst of such an experience of the mountains, objecting to the characterization of the mountains as a “spiritual resource,” not because this is false (anything we can incorporate into ourselves is a resource in some sense), but rather because it is misleading. For if the mountains supply various resources, then there is an open question about which resource use has priority over the others, and when values, potential uses, and various interests and needs all conflict, we must sometimes make compromises. The person who is in some way overwhelmed (or inspired or astonished or humbled) by a mountain may, under the influence of that experience, judge that the beauty and magnificence of the mountain is something that should not be compromised. One way of expressing that thought would be to say that we should preserve the mountains intact, not simply as a way of preserving a valuable (spiritual) resource, but because the mountains, in their magnificence and beauty, command a kind of respect, or even reverence. I imagine that those who are deeply offended and pained by the fact of mountaintop removal feel that it is not possible

¹¹ Robert Elliot, “Faking Nature,” *Inquiry*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1982), 81-93.

¹² There are several recent collections of writings by Appalachians who oppose mountaintop removal: Silas House and Jason Howard, eds., *Something’s Rising: Appalachians Fighting Mountaintop Removal* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2009); Jason Howard, ed., *We All Live Downstream: Writing about Mountaintop Removal* (Louisville, KY: Mote Books, 2009); Kristin Johannsen, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Mary Ann Taylor-Hall, eds., *Missing Mountains: We Went to the Mountaintop but It Wasn’t There* (Nicholasville, KY: Wind, 2005).

for such a massive operation—which removes natural beauty along with the coal—to be reconciled with the thought that we should respect (or revere) the mountains.

A different approach involves a reconsideration of our concept of a *life*, and points toward a way of understanding the mountains themselves as living beings. In *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold writes of the White Mountain in Arizona that, “On a fair morning the mountain invited you to get down and roll in its new grass and flowers (your less inhibited horse did just this if you failed to keep a tight rein).”¹³ The suggestion that the mountain literally *invites* anything will strike many as anthropomorphic, but here I am interested in how we might think about the relationship between the mountain and “its new grass and flowers.” We might think of these as the mountain’s possessions, or we might think of them as the mountain’s bodily features (the grass akin to the stubble on a man’s chin). Either way, the relation between the mountain and the other living things that thrive upon on it—often woven into its earthiness—can be made to evoke an image of a living subject. This is not a life in the narrow sense of a discrete organism (perhaps individuated by metabolic processes or DNA), but if it is life that begets life, then there is something missing from the conception of a mountain as merely a big, dead rock.

In the chapter “Thinking like a Mountain,” Leopold attributes knowledge and perspective to mountains: “Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.”¹⁴ Leopold recounts the lessons learned in the middle of the 20 century, by those who (like Leopold) thought that killing wolves would increase deer populations in a manner beneficial to hunters. Instead, deer populations exploded, and then starved, leaving behind a diminished mountain landscape:

...every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anemic desuetude, and then to death... every edible tree defoliated to a height of a saddle-horn... In the end the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too much, bleach with the bones of the dead sage, or molder under the high-lined junipers.

¹³ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* [1949] (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 133.

¹⁴ Leopold, 137.

I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer herd. (139-140)

Leopold speculates that the mountains have “long known” “Thoreau’s dictum: In wildness is the salvation of the world.” The wolf, the wild, is as essential as every other part of the system. This old knowledge of the mountains contrasts, of course, with human short- and near-sightedness, and the resulting hubris of our sense of control over nature. One can object that a mountain cannot literally know (or think) anything. I doubt that Leopold would be much impressed by such literal-mindedness, since he is inviting a more imaginative transaction between us and the mountains. To “think like a mountain” is to let the mountain teach us something. This is again to conceive of the mountain as the kind of subject—a teacher—to whom our respect, and attention, is due.

Against these ideas, we should acknowledge that not everyone has such reactions to nature, and one might thus conclude that the reactions and conceptualizations of mountain lovers and travelers are “subjective.” Generally, when the term “subjective” is invoked in this way, one means that the subjective reaction lacks objective validity—that there is no “right way” to respond to the mountain (or a work of art)—and thus that one could not rationally criticize someone who failed to share that subjective reaction. This often means that labeling a response as subjective is a way of *dismissing* it. Another, related, term of dismissal is the description of a person’s reaction or behavior as *sentimental*; the implicit charge is that the sentimental person’s reaction or behavior fails to be clear-headed. (One might argue that it is sentimental, and also anthropomorphic, to regard the mountain as commanding respect: mountains don’t give commands, or think, fear, or know.) The tough-minded coal executive, set on extracting the available coal, might thereby use the language of subjectivity (or sentimentality) to dismiss the protests of mountain lovers.

The problem with such a dismissal is that it presupposes that there is *a* right way—or perhaps only one way—to look at, and conceptualize, the mountain. However, I think there is a clear disanalogy between seeing the mountain as something warranting respect and reverence and seeing the mountain as *merely* a resource. Recall again that not everyone experiences feelings of awe, reverence, or humility when facing the mountain.

(Perhaps still fewer have the requisite imagination to “think like a mountain.”) Such a person might say: “it’s just a big rock.” The person who does experience the mountain as something profound does not cease to see the mountain as “a big rock,” but something is added—it no longer makes sense to say that it’s *just* a big rock. It’s tempting then to suggest that the person who sees the mountain as just a big rock is *missing something that can be seen (or experienced) about the mountain*. The person who stands in awe of the mountain need not be under the impression that there aren’t useful seams of coal layered within it. Seeing the mountain as awesome, an object of reverence (and perhaps mystery), is simply incompatible with switching back to a perspective from which it is *really* just a big rock, *just* a useful resource—because one is now aware that there is more than one way to look at the mountain.

Seeing the mountain in these other ways is not simply a set of “subjectively” different ways of seeing the same thing; it is to see the mountain in ways that some are (unfortunately) *unable* to see it. Being blind to something’s majesty or beauty (or wisdom) is not a sufficient reason for treating it otherwise (though it would no doubt explain why a person acts in particular ways); it would only be a sufficient reason if one could justify the absolute dismissal of the experiences of those who see the mountain as something worthy of respect or reverence. I have not tried to settle questions about what the “right” way is to understand, or “see,” a mountain; beyond a certain point, what such questions presuppose might not make sense. One could see it as a natural beauty, a non-living, but still sacred object. One could see it as a living being, or a wellspring of life-potential. One could see it as a teacher. But it is decidedly not “*just* a big rock.” I don’t think we can dismiss the significance of any of these ways of seeing the mountain, just because they are each bound up with a sensibility which some people lack. This would be like dismissing the existence of harmonies because some people are tone-deaf.

If a mountain is sacred, then it can be desecrated—be it living or dead. If it is alive, it can be harmed—that is, have its life diminished. The poet Jim Wayne Miller described the mined Appalachians, from the perspective of his Appalachian everyman Brier, as “Cut up and bleeding... breathing hard, / in places torn and gouged beyond all

healing.”th None of this requires anything like the concept of sentience that informs the slogan that sentience is the foundation of ethics. All of this, I submit, is nevertheless relevant to responsible moral reflection on our relations to the mountains.

I do not mean to insist that this discussion settles practical questions about mountaintop removal. My suggestion that a mountain is something to which we can intelligibly direct attitudes of respect, awe, and reverence is a point of departure rather than a point of conclusion. I cannot really insist upon more than that, without hypocrisy, since I, too, drive upon roads that have been cut through the mountains. Nevertheless, discussions about practices like mountaintop removal cannot be settled by merely pragmatic, expedient exhortations such as that “Coal Keeps the Lights On.”¹⁵ This is just a sly way of insisting that one shouldn’t ask questions or re-examine one’s current concepts, values, and practices.

IV. Toward a More Universal Respect

An important point here is that there is nothing wild or radical about the idea of treating nature with respect. The idea that we should tread lightly upon the earth is not new. Nor is the thought that there are no *a priori* limits to what can be viewed under the aspect of the awesome, or astonishing, or beautiful. Seeing the world, or the various things within it, under these aspects *is* transformative—it is to have one’s eyes opened to the wonderful mystery hiding just beneath the surface of even the most trivial things. Holmes Rolston III, for example, shows us a way of bringing even (mere?) dirt into such focus: “Earth is all dirt, we humans too rise up from the humus, and we find revealed what dirt can do

th “The Brier’s Pictorial History of the Mountains,” *The Brier Poems* (Frankfort, KY: Gnomon Press, 1997), 127. It is worth adding that while Miller (or, Brier) sees that the mountains are “in places torn and gouged beyond all healing,” he adds that they are also “in others beautiful and blessed as ever.”

¹⁵ There are other concerns about coal-mining and coal-burning that go beyond the scope of my concern here, and obviously a serious discussion of continued mining must also take into account many other ecological considerations. These issues include not only the environmental impact of burning the mined coal, but also, and more immediately, the impact of mining and refining processes (such as the impoundment of coal slurry atop mine sites, and the effects of slurry runoff) on local environments and their inhabitants, both non-human and human. These concerns are explored in recent documentary films including *Coal Country* (2009) and *Sludge* (2005), which documents the coal sludge disaster—one of the largest ecological disasters in U.S. history—in Martin County, Kentucky, in 2000.

when it is self-organizing under suitable conditions. This is pretty spectacular dirt.”¹⁶ Practical concerns about energy, roads, development, and so forth need not be taken to be *at odds* with such attitudes of respect, reverence, and wonder. Rather, I believe it is possible for the practical to be infused with the mindfulness of these attitudes. Rather than drawing firm (and often arbitrary) lines that divide the sacred and the profane, or the morally considerable and the morally irrelevant, the infusing of our practical concerns with, for example, the attitude of respect simply involves *not* drawing fixed lines and thereby *not* excluding anything (or anyone) from basic moral consideration and concern.¹⁷ Thomas Birch affirms this idea when he writes,

From the historical perspective, we see that whenever we have closed off the question [of who or what deserves moral consideration] with the institution of some practical criterion, we have later found ourselves in error, and have had to open the question up again to reform our practices in a further attempt to make them ethical. The lesson of history is that we must open up the question of moral considerability and *keep it open, not* close it off again by instituting practices based on the latest, and no doubt mistaken, “final” criterion.¹⁸

If Birch’s advice is sound (and our history of excluding others unfairly suggests that it is), then his remarks offer yet another reason for refusing to accept the claim that sentience is *the* foundation of ethics.

16 Holmes Rolston III, “Value in Nature and the Nature of Value,” in Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey, eds., *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 36 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 26-27. The recent documentary film, *Dirt! The Movie* (<http://www.dirtthemovie.org/>), wonderfully captures the ways in which many cultures celebrate the sacred (as well as the living) in dirt, which we all too easily think of as dead matter.

17 A common objection here, meant to expose the sentimentality of the line of thought I’m offering, is that it neglects to address the existence of things like viruses, pests, and vermin, and we might add to that list things like garbage. The response to this sort of objection is that the call for a more universal respect and attentiveness is not meant to be incompatible with practical living (which may involve killing viruses, keeping pests out of the house, and taking out the garbage). Just as the imperative to “love one’s enemy” is not a command to let one’s enemies get away with anything, so, too, the call for the cultivation of universal respect is not a command to assimilate all things to a single category or to regard everything as an equal in every sense. (None of this requires that we fall into the latter sort of incoherence.)

18 Thomas Birch, “Moral Considerability and Universal Consideration,” *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (1993), 321.

As I said above, none of this is to reject the moral relevance of sentience. Indeed, the fact that a being is sentient—that it is a living, experiencing being, capable of suffering and enjoyment—is a distinctive fact about that being to be considered when we reflect upon how we should relate to it. Showing sentient beings respect might indeed take different forms than the respect we might show to other beings. Furthermore, once we are in a position to acknowledge that moral considerability does not in every case *depend* upon sentience, we can part ways with this rather abstract concept and return to much more ordinary categories of thought, such of those of the *human* and of the *animal* and so on. For we relate to humans and animals, not as merely sentient beings, but as the specific kinds of beings they are. (Similarly, we relate to a mountain as a mountain, not as a non-sentient being.) Once we allow that respect can flow freely toward the various categories of life and nature, we don't particularly *need* the notion of sentience in order to expose the confusion of someone who dismisses ethical questions about our treatment of animals on the grounds that they are “just animals.”¹⁹ What becomes clear is that dismissing *anything* because it is “just” what it is involves an *unjust* form of thought—a refusal to question one's own dogmas and preconceptions, to hear the voices and experiences of others, or to open oneself to new kinds of experience or ways of seeing. In the end, dismissals of this sort are not forms of thought at all—they are instead forms of thoughtlessness.²⁰

I wish to draw a final connection between the ideas above and those of another speaker in the Fall 2010 ECU Chautauqua Lecture Series, the writer Mark St. Pierre.²¹ As he explored the Lakota perspective on the proper relations of humans to the environment, St. Pierre described the Lakota view that the human soul has four parts, the fourth being a spiritual essence (the *Tun*) that resides in all living things. This essence is never destroyed, and thus persists even after the death of an organism, is returned to the earth, and absorbed into other living things. St. Pierre employed this idea to suggest that if Native Americans have inhabited all parts of North America for 30,000 years, then in all

¹⁹ Cora Diamond powerfully explores similar ideas in her critique of Singer and Tom Regan in her, “Eating Meat and Eating People,” *Philosophy*, Vol. 53, No. 206 (1978), 465-479.

²⁰ On thoughtlessness, see Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, “Species Extinction and the Vice of Thoughtlessness,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 23 (2010), 61-83.

²¹ Mark St. Pierre, ECU Chautauqua Lecture, “Are We Frogs Drinking Up the Pond in Which We Live?”, delivered November 18, 2010. DVD copy held in the ECU Libraries Special Collections and Archives.

likelihood, every person who lives upon, and is sustained by, the goods of North American soil has absorbed some part of this soul substance. In that sense, we are all (or have become), St. Pierre suggested, Native Americans. St. Pierre expressed a definite concern that these ideas would be dismissed as quaint, unscientific. Whatever their scientific merit, I do not find them quaint at all. Indeed, they capture a significance of the truth that, “you are dust and to dust you shall return,” which is all too easily overlooked. The usual interpretation of this remark about dust is: be humble. But if Rolston is right that dirt (and so also dust) is amazing stuff, then the humbling perception of ourselves as being made of the same stuff as the dead, as the mountains, of all that is, can also be ennobling. Grasping those connections would be to see the world in a way such that everything—not merely the sentient things—commands a careful attention, consideration, and respect. Without a continually renewed effort to refine and deepen our own moral vision, to attend to mysterious experiences, and to reconsider the heretofore neglected or dismissed, we will simply go on, more or less thoughtlessly, and so more or less recklessly, with our business as usual.²²

²² Special thanks to Mike Austin and Duncan Richter for their comments on an early version of this essay.