CHAPTER 14:

Enlivenment: Ecological Morals as Mutuality in Beauty

Nature, life and beauty cannot be untangled.
— Sandra Lubarsky

The Grunewald forest stretches from the western fringes of the inner city of Berlin far south to the urban borders. The wood extends for about six miles until it meets the Wannsee Lake, where in early summer the nightingales sing, those sweet Berlin spring birds we visited in Chapter 8. I often ride my bike through those Grunewald forest areas, which are a bit closer to the city, in order to take my energetic poodle out into the woods. As both dog and owner have become a bit conservative over the years, we usually follow the same route. It leads to an impressive old oak tree, which stands some yards apart from the path winding through the forest. The tree is our destination, a place to rest for some minutes in the presence of a very particular being — or maybe, rather, a whole universe of beings contained in itself, always changing and still always the same.

The tree may be 500 years old. It looks old — battered, rugged, huge. Its bulky trunk has split into several heavy branches, which are partly broken, half alive and half dead. The lifeless arms stand out naked in the air among other twigs aflutter with leaves. A huge bulb grows out of the lower stem, obviously some deformation caused by a parasite, which must also be hundreds of years old. The tree is punctured with holes, where in spring tits and woodpeckers nest, where bats find cover during the summer nights and where hornets build their lairs. From other openings the soft yellow flesh of huge fungi spreads during the growing season. A couple of mistletoes have clutched the branches, and in the earth piling up in some forks between branches, ferns have started to grow. It feels good to arrive

here and to rest for some moments in the perimeter of the old living being, which so effortlessly integrates all the contradictions of being alive within its scope, embracing birth and death simultaneously.

My old live oak in the Grunewald forest is an image of an environmental ethics that works and is productive without using any words or other descriptions. It does not follow an abstract concept but manages to integrate a host of diverging embodied interests. They all can coexist if none takes up too much space, if all enter into some sort of mutuality. We can experience that this structure of shared lifelines is successful because it attracts us. It is beautiful. We feel at home here. In the last chapter we have seen that it is impossible to reason about an ecological ethics, or an ethical position concerning the living in general, without taking into account the true needs of living beings. Ethical behavior is a performance that fulfills exactly these needs. In this short chapter I want to show that these needs are always mingled with the needs of others and that all thinking about a possible ethics has to start from this vantage point. This has another crucial consequence: we cannot think about what a good life is if we do not ask ourselves how a healthy ecosystem works.

We need to approach ethics from the ecological stance of massively distributed interbeing for another reason as well. As we have seen, a living being is deeply paradoxical in nature. It is form through matter; it is an immaterial inwardness ruling a body, and it is self through the other. If we isolate subjects from these dialectical exchange processes, the only means through which they realize themselves, then we cut off this necessary paradox. In the living processes of the biosphere these different dimensions are integrated in the same way as the live oak has integrated its own dying into the ever-renewing vortex of diversity it offers to the Grunewald forest.

The leading question for an ecological ethics, therefore, cannot be focused on the behavior of a moral subject alone. It needs to encompass all subjects *and* the whole they are bound together in. Therefore, the problem could be formulated as this: what is needed in order to allow that an embodied subject is able to unfold itself in interbeing

with others and in order to let the others thrive through the well-being of the embodied subject?

POETIC MORALS

Let us listen to the living body once again. It follows its values in the most visible, palpable, seizable manner — all contrary to the belief of conventional biology that all strivings of living beings are only semblance, the "just as" of an automaton. Life wants to live on, wants more of life, wants to expand, to swell and to blossom; wants to propagate itself and rise again in a thousandfold manners. Life wants to be subject in an emphatic way. This is one of its two sides: the desire for autonomy. The other side is its need for what it is not: for the matter that is the sole means through which it can develop its identity. This other side is the want for the presence of other beings in which the subject recognizes itself, a yearning for those others, which it can love in order to grow. If the other brings forth myself, then she is an absolute value for me, which stands for itself and does not only arise through rational reasoning. All autonomy is born through the other. Every subject is not sovereign but rather an intersubject — a self-creating pattern in an unfathomable meshwork of longings, repulsions and dependencies.

We hit a paradox here again. If there remains no fixed structure of a being's self as soon as we really proceed into its depths, into the abyss of a "selfless self," then its actual well-being is in effect a gift from the other. We come into being only through the other. Self and other are so intimately interwoven that, if we insist on first discerning what a living being is and does, before talking about norms, we immediately run into its entanglement with other. Other is first. Without other, there is no self. We need the gracious gaze of the alien black eyes if we want to learn to know ourselves. But the primacy of the other for self does not mean that self is not important. To the contrary — self is still the other for an other. Self is part of interbeing and part of an unfolding world. The true locus of value, therefore, can only be the living meshwork. The web. Life that accomplishes

itself is that which enhances all the possible relations in this web, which does not cut off one of them but rather reinforces the existing ones and weaves in new ones. We are nothing without nature. We are opposed to it as we are contained in it. We are a fold in its infinite tissue. We are its imagination just as it is ours.

Before we can debate a new ethics, therefore, we humans, the speaking subjects, first need to understand ourselves anew through our symbiotic entanglement with all the other beings. Moral reasoning becomes a question of the language used. Rather than being a rational means to codify objective relationships (or a totally detached self-referential game), language can be our medium for partaking in a larger organic whole. We should stop viewing it as the sharp blade severing us from the rest of nature and rather understand it, as the poet and philosopher Gary Snyder so eloquently argues, as our way to be part of the wild. Language is what welds us together with the silent realm of meanings, for it exposes that feeling which the body only can show in mute joy or suffering.

Let us not forget: it was Orpheus, the singer, who made the trees shiver and yearn to listen to his song. Every human has the ability to speak with the Orphic voice, that poetic way of saying that early Greek mythology remembered from time immemorial. The Orphic voice does not blindly posit, but speaks through listening. It sees with words coming from the inside of poetic space. It lends a voice to the phenomena themselves, which makes plants and stones answer and grants the poet the powers to speak as a part of the world around him. The Orphic voice always comes with existential morals. It has an ethical dimension from the beginning because it invites every being to partake, to speak out in the grand concerto. Poets of all ages have tried to express this common space of meanings that at the same time are inward and outside, both body and sense. These meanings are understood not by finding new expressions for them but are bestowed. "The highest would be to realize that all 'matters of fact' are really theory. The blue of the heavens reveals to us the fundamental

law of chromatics," Goethe claimed. "Let man seek nothing behind the phenomena, for they themselves are the doctrine."[1] The American poet Wallace Stevens, who in his main job was an insurance company executive, proclaimed a similar purpose for writing as "becoming what surrounds me." Poetic expression resonates with ecological meanings, with the core experience of being alive, which cannot be exhausted with words. It is ecological, and in being ecological, it contains an ethics of aliveness.

Any ethics must start on ecological grounds. And in being ecological, it cannot do other than be poetic. It has to achieve the everyday magic of life in which inwardness and outwardness become mutually expressive. This entanglement always enacts an ethics. To speak and to create new symbols by syllables — sentences, sounds, images, gestures — is one of our deep possibilities for partaking in creative nature. It is the human manner of finding expression. This is not something that sets us apart from other living beings but rather is the extension of their natural autonomy, their natural freedom into the sphere of discursive reason, which is nothing without them.

The speaking subject already speaks for something else. This other speaks only in order to be heard through the subject. Both are part of a network of mutual transformations. The ethics we are looking for, therefore, must satisfy two needs: it must first consider how biological subjectivity comes forth and to what degree the body's needs are the foundation of all value. Second, however, it must take into account that any ethics must be equally based on what is good for the whole — the ecological network — as well as for the subject. Our ethics, therefore, needs to be massively distributed and always able to creatively change the subjects for which it manifests. Briefly, it needs to be rhizomatic. It must, in other words, understand reality as the web of contiguous transformations the French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called a rhizome.[2]

A rhizome is real and abstract, felt and fabricated; it is bodily touch, imagination and memory all in one. The rhizome is our

rootedness in the others, our birth through their gestures and of theirs through us. Think of the real plants in the forest and their symbiosis with the invisible fungi in the soil. This meshwork of subterranean threads travels through the earth and enables plants to emerge and mushrooms to bud from it. Our language is like a fungal body emerging from this invisible deeper connection, bringing the fruits of a deeper interconnectedness to maturity.

From these deliberations we can sketch the following skeleton of biocentric values. They all modify one principal idea, which is that we need to preserve nature because it is ourselves, and because, paradoxically, it is everything that we are not.

1. We need to preserve nature as the embodiment of individual needs. These needs are a real "ought," perceived and expressed by subjects. Values have a material dimension. They are self-organizing.
2. We need to preserve nature as the visible shape of inwardness, as reference for feeling, as the gestalt of our own psyche. Without nature, we risk losing important parts of our scope of feelings. We risk losing our ability to love.
3. We need to preserve nature because without it we are speechless. We need plants and animals as parts of ourselves, both in physiological and in psychological terms.
4. We need to preserve nature because it shows us possibilities of existence we could never know alone. These comprise following a principle of plenitude, desiring a maximum of possibilities, seeking continuous development, craving authentic expression, respecting silence, being energetic in doing and devoted in resting, alternating each summer with a winter, each day with a night.

5. We need to preserve nature, for it is the place of the absolute other. This absoluteness, which some philosophers have called *countenance*, is the absoluteness of being. The countenance of the real other is the door leading into the absolute other. We must preserve plants and animals in order to enable them to witness.

This last point is important. A poetic ethics does not strive for perfection but cares to leave open the crack through which suffering, but also the necessary light comes in.[3] Nature is not the all-embracing wholeness that grants salvation. This wholeness, therefore, cannot be the aim of an ecological ethics. Nature is fragile and fragmentary to the core, and only through this fragility can it be creative and life-giving. The values of the living are at once paradoxical and contradictory. This imperfection is the necessary prerequisite for creation to emerge. An ecological ethics must, therefore, center on this imperfection. It is an ethics of mutual accommodation, rather than one of control.

Nature does not confer salvation but healing. Healing means to transform the oscillating dance on the razor's edge of aliveness into the beauty of a new imagination of what life can mean. It is a process, not a state, and thus never to be secured. It is a dynamic balance tied to the moment and to the situation. Healing means to overcome the cleft between the individual and the other, between the individual and the whole, for one short moment. The great psychologist Erich Fromm saw our developmental goal as the union between freedom and relatedness. This union, however, is nothing that can be achieved. It is a contradiction in itself and, therefore, always means negotiation, a solution that is not exhaustive but rather a momentary compromise. Healing does not signify finding the definite answer but responding with another, more interesting question.

LIFE AS ETHICAL PRACTICE: THE ECOLOGY OF THE COMMONS

An ecological ethics is about finding a way to enable healing. Any creation is imperfect; the enigma of autonomy-in-connection is always painfully real. How shall the compromise be created? What does a balance look like? Here, it is beautiful and very helpful that we can direct our gaze not only to nature itself but also to the many ways in which other civilizations have inserted themselves into ecological systems and have tried to treat nature in a way that both humans and other beings were connected in a continuous process of being mutually healed. In many respects the rituals of archaic cultures and still-existing ethnic groups are about a healing mediation between humans and the organic web. In the cultural symbolic system of these peoples, these ritual powers also grant human existence. The rules leading to this mediation are general, as they are always about life's duality of individual and whole, and they are local, as they enact the bigger picture in a unique way. This is the situation we find in every ecosystem.

In a temperate forest like the Grunewald, which has given rise to my beloved live oak, there are different rules for flourishing than in a dry desert. Each ecosystem is the product of many rules, interactions and streams of matter, which share common principles but are locally exclusive. This strict locality follows from the fact that living beings do not only *use* the ecological meshwork provided by nature; they are physically and relationally *a part of it*. The individuals' existence is inextricably linked to the existence of the overarching system. The quality of this system, its health and beauty, are based on a precarious balance, which has to be negotiated from moment to moment. It is a balance between too much autonomy of the individual and too much pressure for necessity exerted by the system. Flourishing ecosystems historically have developed a host of patterns of balance, which lead to extraordinary refinement and high levels of aesthetic beauty. Hence, the forms and beings of nature can be experienced as solutions that maintain a delicate balance in a complex society. These solutions are functional for life, and in being so they make our core

self resonate. Therefore, the embodied solutions of individual-existence-in-connection exert that special beauty of the living, which fills most humans with an experience of meaning and belonging.

Nature as such is the paradigm of distributed subjects, which realize themselves only in mutual transformation. Any ethics, therefore, must start by taking this extreme form of mutuality seriously. Nothing in nature is subject to monopoly; everything is open source. The quintessence of the organic realm is not the selfish gene but the source code of genetic information lying open to all. As there is no property in nature, there is no waste. All waste byproducts are food. Every individual at death offers itself as a gift to be feasted upon by others, in the same way it has received its existence by the gift of sunlight. There is a still largely unexplored connection between giving and taking in which loss is the precondition for productivity.

In the ecological commons a multitude of different individuals and diverse species stand in various relations with one another — competition and cooperation, partnership and predation, productivity and destruction. All these relations, however, follow one higher law: over the long run only behavior that allows for productivity of the whole ecosystem and that does not interrupt its self-production is amplified. The individual can realize itself only if the whole can realize itself. Ecological freedom obeys this form of necessity. The deeper the connections in the system become, the more creative niches it will afford for its individual members.

As we can see, a thorough analysis of ecology can yield a powerful ethics. But this ethics is more than a set of principles of moral actions towards other beings. An ethics that accepts being deeply entangled with the self-producing values of living beings is at the same time a view about reality, an ontology. The ethics we are looking for binds together an understanding of reality, the principles for remaining in interbeing with that reality and, as the most important guideline, that reality is above all a process of self-creating freedom. In respect to these requirements we can see that natural processes can define a blueprint to transform our treatment of the embodied, material aspect of our existence into a culture of being

alive. Ecological creativity, which includes humans in a larger metabolism, provides the binding element between the natural and the social or cultural worlds. To understand nature in its genuine quality as a system of ecological transformations opens the way to a novel understanding of ourselves, in our biological as well as in our social life.

Although the deliberations that have led us to this point stem from a thorough analysis of biology, their results are not biologistic but rather the opposite. Our analysis has revealed that the organic realm is the paradigm for the evolution of freedom. The necessities resulting from that basic principle are non-deterministic. They are rather grounded in an intricate understanding of embodied freedom and its relationship to the whole: the individual receives her options of self-realization through the prospering of the life/social systems she belongs to. To organize a community (between humans and/or nonhuman agents) according to the principles of embodied ecology, therefore always means to increase individual freedom by enlarging the community's freedom (see the table below).

Implicit Ethics in Different Views of Nature

Darwinism	Enlivenment
DISPLACEMENT	TRANSFORMATION
RESOURCE DEPENDENCY	DEPENDENT FREEDOM
SEQUENTIAL OPTIMIZATION	INTEGRATION
SURVIVORS	SUBJECT-IN-COMMUNITY
LOCAL	LOCAL AND GLOBAL (HOLISTICALLY INTEGRATED)
SUSTAINABILITY = EFFICIENCY	SUSTAINABILITY = FELT MEANING
PREDATION AND DEFENSE	OPEN SOURCE
WINNER TRANSMITS MOST GENES	WINNER MORE DEEPLY INTERWOVEN WITH COMMUNITY
EFFICIENCY	DIVERSITY OF EXPRESSIONS
DOMINANCE	SHARING
SPECIES UNDER SELECTION PRESSURE	COMMONS
SEPARATION	PARTICIPATION

Contrary to what our dualistic culture supposes, reality is not divided into separate domains of matter (biophysics, deterministic approach) and culture/society (non-matter, nondeterministic or mental/culturalistic approach). Living reality rather depends on a precarious balance between autonomy and relatedness on all its levels. It is a creative process, which produces rules for an increase of the whole through the self-realization of each of its members. These rules are different for each time and each place, but we find them everywhere life is. They are valid for autopoiesis, the autocreation of the organic forms but also for a well-achieved human relationship, for a prospering ecosystem as well as for an economy in harmony with the biospheric household.

The ethics we need to look for in the realm of living things, therefore, cannot be a set of abstract principles. It must be a practice of realizing oneself through connection with others, who are also free to realize themselves. Gary Snyder calls this a "practice of the wild." If we look to the ways other cultures have tried to become a creative part of ecosystems, hence to actually practice the wild, we can observe that the form they do this is what we would call a commons. The other beings are not an outside nor a resource. They share a common productive and poetic reality.

Historically, we understand by "commons" an economic system in which various participants use the same resource and follow particular rules in order not to overexploit it. If we look deeper into actual commons principles, we can see that the traditional commoners do not distinguish between the resource they protect and themselves, as users of the resource. The members of a commons are not conceptually detached from the space they are acting in. The commons and the commoners are the same. This is basically the situation in an ecosystem.[4]

The idea of the commons thus provides a unifying principle that dissolves the supposed opposition between nature and society/culture. It cancels the separation of the ecological and the social. In any existence that commits itself to the commons, the task we must

face is to realize the well-being of the individual while not risking a decrease of the surrounding and encompassing whole. If nature actually *is* a commons, it follows that the only possible way to formulate a working ecological ethics — which inserts the human right in the middle of nature and at the same time allows for freedom of self-expression and technological invention — will be as an ecology of the commons. The self-realization of *Homo sapiens* can be best achieved in a system of common goods because such a culture (and thus any household or market system) is the species-specific realization of our own particular embodiment of being alive within a common system of other living subjects. The commons philosopher and activist David Bollier claims accordingly: "We need to recover a world in which we all receive *gifts* and we all have *duties*."[5]

ETHICS AS FIRST-PERSON ECOLOGY

Agency is always inscribed within a living system of other animate forces, each of which is both sovereign and interdependent at the same time. In the commons, humankind does not hold arbitrary sway as a ruler but plays a role as an attentive subject in a network of relationships. The effects of interactions reflect back on those acting, while all other nodes, animated or abstract — human subjects, bats, fungi, bacteria, aesthetic obsessions, infections or guiding concepts — are active as well. Every commons, therefore, can also be described as a rhizome — a material and informal network of living, incarnate and meaningful connections, which constantly changes as it mutates and evolves.

The innermost core of aliveness cannot be classified and negotiated rationally. It is only possible through being involved in experiences and creative expression. That is why the idea of the commons, which is fundamentally about real subjects seeking nourishment and meaning through physical, pragmatic, material and symbolic means, is the best way to describe an ecological connection to the rest of the biosphere and to provide a blueprint for an ecological ethics. For a commons is always an embodied, material, perceptible, existential

and symbolic negotiation of individual existence through the other and the whole. It is an attempt to echo the forms of order implied in the self-creating wild through acts of creative transformation in response to the existential imperatives of the wild.

This dimension of living reality, therefore, should follow a *dialogic* rather than a binary logic, as French philosopher Edgar Morin claims. Morin's dialogic does not try to eliminate contradictions but explicitly thrives on them. It is a logic of dialogue and polyphony;of encounters, conversations, mutual transformations and interpretations; a logic of negotiation and striking compromises. It is this stance of negotiating, adapting and enduring that has determined the way in which humans have dealt with the more-than-human world since time immemorial.[6]

An ecosystem through its shape as commons not only integrates agents and the whole, which these agents build up. Its reality is at the same time material and structural, experienced and created. It, therefore, combines subjective and objective perspectives. Emotional experience is not alien to the conception of an ecological commons but central to it. In an ethics of mutual ecological transformation, feeling is a central part. As inwardness is the necessary way bodies experience themselves, feeling is also a crucial component of an ecological ethics. It is not an add-on that might be tolerated; it is inextricably linked to the reality of ecological functioning. If a living being participates in the exchange processes of an ecosystem, it also gets emotionally involved. This emotional dimension is how living beings experience the relevance of their connections, the meaning of how others reciprocate and how the whole setting acts on their self-productive process. To be connected, to be in metabolism, is always an existential engagement, and this echoes as feeling. Feeling is, so to speak, the core self of a commons ethic. It symbolizes how well the mutual realization of individuality and the whole are achieved.

Indian geographer Neera Singh has shown the extent to which this emotive power encourages commoners to act and provides subjective rewards for their action. She demonstrates that villagers in

rural India not only make resources more productive through their commoning with forests. They also satisfy emotional needs and "transform their individual and collective subjectivities."[7] They are engaging in an active poetics of relating in which the human affect and the material world commune with each other and alter one another, in which inwardness is expressed through living bodies and material objects always have a symbolic and felt aspect. Participating in a commons of this kind for a human means to fully realize her ecological potential and to experience this realization through the feeling of living a full life. Again, as I pointed out in Chapter 9, this constellation is known by a common term: we call it love.[8]

BEAUTY IS HEALING

Our capability as living beings to inwardly experience the existential meaning of outward relationships gives us a means of emotional ethical evaluation. We always automatically assess the degree to which an ecosystem, or any relational structure we are involved with, is able to grant us the freedom to be and to be in connection. This evaluation is part of the process of living and hence of relating. Inwardly, this is the feeling of being alive, the experienced aliveness. Feeling alive or "enlivened" is, therefore, an immediate way to experience whether a set of relationships is healthy or not. We feel what J.M. Coetzee described as joy, as the experience of full living. We could also call it the experience of beauty. It is an experience which connects the perspectives of first and third person, the observation and the felt meaning.[9]

Therefore, "where there is much life, there is the potential for great beauty," as the American environmental philosopher Sandra Lubarsky observes. Beauty "is not a quality — blue or shiny or well-proportioned or a composite of these — overlaid on a substance. It is not owned by the world of art or fashion or cosmetics. … It is embedded in life, part of the dynamic, relational structure of the world created by the concert of living beings. And it is what we name those relational structures that encourage freshness and zest so that

life can continue to make life. ... Life, wilderness, biodiversity, and beauty are an interlaced knot; when the cord is cut, the intricacies are lost, the entire weave undone."[10]

By the experience of beauty we are able to evaluate the life-giving potential of a situation or an ecosystem. Beauty, therefore, as a sign of an enlivening situation, is itself giving life. Any aesthetic experience of nature thus is to some degree an ethical assessment. Ugliness, on the other hand, has a certain degree of toxicity. The functional desert of contemporary agricultural landscapes with its few species leaves us uninterested, whereas the Mediterranean dry slope with its rose bushes and bluebirds makes our hearts soften. Rainforest and coral reefs fascinate us, the endless pine steppes of an industrial forest less so. Probably ecologists confronted with the task of assessing the diversity of an ecosystem could renounce complicated sampling methods and simply trust what they see, smell and hear. In the world of living beings the beautiful system most often is the diverse system, and the diverse system is the good system because life imagines itself as the greatest possible plenitude. Still, the beauty of natural systems never appears in the radiant triumph of victory. Ecological stability and the beauty of life are built on the dialectics of birth and death. It is fragile to the core. Its beauty, to which we are free to contribute at any moment, is the hope for healing.