



Environment & Society Portal



The White Horse Press

Full citation: Naess, Arne, "Beautiful Action. Its Function in the Ecological Crisis." *Environmental Values* 2, no. 1, (1993): 67-71.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5490>

Rights: All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 1993. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publishers. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk>.

Beautiful Action. Its Function in the Ecological Crisis

ARNE NAESS

*Council for Environmental Studies
University of Oslo
PO Box 1116, Blindern
0317 Oslo 3, Norway*

ABSTRACT: The distinction made by Kant between ‘moral’ and ‘beautiful’ actions is relevant to efforts to counteract the current ecological crisis. Actions proceeding from inclination may be politically more effective than those depending on a sense of duty. Education could help by fostering love and respect for life.

KEYWORDS: Beautiful actions, deep ecology, environmental education, Kant

1.

In spite of his in some ways unfortunate influence, in my opinion, Kant’s works are and will continue to be a major source of inspiration. In what follows, I borrow his distinction between moral and beautiful actions. I foresee a bright future for his terminology. It offers a fairly new perspective on our actions within the realm of radical environmentalism, or more specifically within the deep ecology movement.

The distinction was introduced by Kant in a work published in 1759, *Versuch einiger Betrachtungen über den Optimismus*, written in the period which (uncritically) is called his ‘uncritical’ period. The distinction has been neglected by historians.

According to the terminology of 1759, an act deserves the name *moral act* if and only if it is solely motivated by respect for the moral law: you do it simply because it is your duty. There is no other motive. Presumably a factual mistake would not spoil the *morality* of an action – if you have done your duty *trying* to find out the facts of the case.

Suppose you do your duty – you perform the action which the moral law prescribes – but not *only* because of respect for the moral law. You perform the act simply because you are inclined to act like that, or at least partly because you have the inclination. It ‘feels natural’ to do it. In that case Kant calls the act *beautiful*. It is neither a moral nor an immoral act. An immoral act is one that conflicts with the moral law. The beautiful act is, in Kant’s terminology, a completely irrelevant act morally speaking.

Presumably Kant would not deny that it may make people glad when they do their duty. The inclination may not be there, they may find it painful or even cruel, as in a war, to do it, but they are glad *that* they resist the temptation *not* to do it. There is a conflict, a situation involving stress, we might say today. When we act beautifully, there is no conflict of feelings involved. It is above all characteristic of beautiful acts “that they display facility and appear to be accomplished without painful toil”. Incidentally, Kant entertained the opinion that women, more than men, act beautifully, from compassion and goodheartedness. Men’s morality has the form of nobility, not beauty, but nobility is “extremely rare”.

2.

So much about the Kantian distinction itself. Next I shall turn to its application in countries manifesting an increase of ecological unsustainability and large-scale destruction of the habitats of other living beings.

The individual persons and the institutions trying to influence ecologically relevant actions in the right direction manifest roughly three different strategies:

- (i) appeal to *usefulness* of ecologically positive actions;
- (ii) emphasis on *moral obligations*; and
- (iii) inducement to develop certain attitudes – *inclinations* in Kantian terminology.

Recently there has been in Norway and other countries an upsurge of interest in environmental ethics at the government level. It is accepted that there is a moral aspect – that everybody, including governments, has a *duty* or *obligation* to act in ecologically responsible ways. The moral appeal is gaining ground among policy makers. Sums of a different order than before have been earmarked for ethical studies as a following up of the ‘Brundtland Report’. Equally important is that now and in the near future sums be available for the study of attitudes towards nature and the conditions favourable to changes in the direction of ecologically responsible actions on every level, including the governmental. These changes may in Kantian terminology be called changes in the direction of greater inclination to act in an ecologically responsible way. An act in the sphere of efforts to overcome the ecological crisis is a moral act if and only if it is motivated by the call to do our duty. But then there are acts done from inclination, and with ecologically beneficial results. They “display facility, and appear to be accomplished without painful toil” – they are *beautiful* acts within the realm of ethically and ecologically relevant contexts. Again incidentally: insofar as we rely on Kant’s judgement, we should expect women to be the main driving force in fostering ecologically relevant beautiful thinking.

A most common commentary by many people who for the first time listen to a description of deep ecology is, “But that is what I have always thought. Only,

I did not have words for it.” They presumably had acted beautifully, without toil, and without words! It is unnecessary to add that the information, “This means you have always acted beautifully!” might have made them proud and eager to continue.

3.

Obviously there is always the possibility that a beautiful act does not have the intended short range or long range consequences. But this applies, according to Kant, in principle, to every action. So when a policy is chosen on the basis of its usefulness or on the basis of morality, there is also this fundamental uncertainty. During the first great green wave (late 60s and early 70s) millions got into the habit of turning off the electric lights when they served no immediate purpose. To leave them burning was difficult, unnatural. Then came sceptics repeating that the life time of an electric bulb would be severely shortened if turned off and on ‘*too much*’, and to make a new bulb costs much energy and resources. Many felt frustration because they saw the uncertainty of both strategies: the calculation of the basis of utility and relying on an acquired inclination.

People badly informed *may* cause small ecological disasters, making false judgements of factual character. Today more than ever it belongs to one’s duties to keep oneself informed: the better informed, the better the basis of predictions of consequences.

“Acting from inclination is superior to acting from duty”. This vague announcement needs comment. Firstly, acting from duty requires conscious analysis of the situation and does not exclude acting in spite of strong disinclination. The sense of duty is generally not very strong, and because conscious analysis is required, or often required, the ways of avoiding unpleasantness through talk are considerable. “It *seems* it is now my duty to do so and so, but close analysis shows that I really do not need to do so and so.”

If it is urgent to make people behave in a certain way in a certain type of situation, the question which has priority is, “Are there any ways we could make them *inclined* to act (energetically and non-violently) in that way?” There are not many noble heroes, and if people are influenced to act from inclination, a stable habit is formed, whereas the moral act, at least as it seems to be conceived by Kant, normally does not form a habit. If it forms a habit, it starts feeling natural, and an inclination occurs. In short, the moral act glides into a beautiful act. Norms are *internalized*, in the terminology of social science. Perhaps Kant has underestimated this development. It increases the importance of appeals to moral capacity, but it does not reduce the importance of processes which tend to induce inclination directly, internalization with verbalized normative appeals such as: “See how nice this animal (flower, landscape,...) is”, or “I wish I could help these people who are forced to live in this polluted area, such work would make me happy!” There are appeals through body language which induce joy and a

process of identification. Such processes make up the non-reflective imitation and adaptation to society by children.

In his monumental *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, Kant goes deeper, but I shall not bring this work into our discussion. We have such and such a special duty *in* such and such kinds of situations. Mostly the adequate reason in answer to the question, “Why do we have that duty in that kind of situation?” is in terms of higher order moral norms combined with a relevant classification of the kind of situation at hand. Duties are better described as ‘relational’, rather than ‘relative’.

Intense, protracted questioning more or less inevitably leads in the direction of codified systems of normative ethics. This has been done most thoroughly by the Catholic Church in the more stable Middle Ages. Here it is only relevant to remind ourselves of the moral *corrigibility* of any concrete announcement of a duty in a concrete situation, and the analogous need of change in the direction of a beautiful action. Hypotheses about the ‘facts’ of the situation are involved.

4.

Which are the main ways to promote more and more consistently beautiful actions in the fight for ecological sustainability? This is a fight which has to be fought by individuals in their private capacity, and by all sorts of institutions in the wide sense.

It is easiest to start with educational institutions in the materially rich countries – from kindergarten to university.

In kindergartens the body-language of the respected people taking care of small children is decisive. The care and respect manifested in every interaction with every living being has immediate, and strong, effect. One of the elementary conditions necessary is the presence of such beings. In Tokyo and many other places we find kindergartens (children gardens!) practically without any noticeable non-humans except some occasional flies which are treated as intruders. Much of the space is occupied by contraptions of various mechanical kinds.

In elementary schools knowledge is often taken to be as important as appreciation, insight, or feelings of nearness and wonder. (Children are thought of as beings that must be useful, successful and well-entertained). The socialization process is important but unhappily the ‘environment’ they are mostly adapted to today is the extremely poor community of humans, dogs and cats, and perhaps some spectacular big plants, roses, etc. Their teachers are not expected to manifest love and respect for life, nor to reveal the difference between life quality and standard of living in their interaction with the children.

At the other end of formal teaching – postgraduate seminars – even when life forms are studied, the style in which they are taught is that of an observer, not a participant. Excursions are rarely conducted in silence so that those involved can hear clearly what trees, tiny animals and plants are telling. Interaction with

fellow students is permitted to go on as if they were alone, and not together with a myriad of beings. And they are not taught to express what they *really* experience and what *gestalts* they participate in, leaving out subject/object relations. They may get their doctor's degrees without *sensing* what they are talking about. And if they *have* gained 'cognition' (not only knowledge), they are not stimulated to consider how to *inspire* or *lead* others, without many words, to acquire what Spinoza calls 'understanding love' or 'loving understanding'.

When we proceed to the subject of institutions, the social and political framework of the individual, practically nothing is done to protect the insights a minority has gained, or to stimulate further gains. The United Nations World Charter for Nature (1982) is not taken seriously when it proclaims the intrinsic value of Nature, independent of its narrow usefulness for humans.

Consider the example of fisheries policy. In Norway, the leaders of organized labour and the politicians of the labour party know that previous policies have been disastrous for the richness and diversity of fish in vast areas. They know they have to propose exasperatingly small quotas. This perpetuates high unemployment. Their duty is clear, but the unemployed fishermen are furious. The political life of the leaders is precarious in this situation. The temptation to propose somewhat bigger quotas is normally there. But for the few who have internalized ecological norms, there is no temptation whatsoever. To propose unpopular regulations based on ecological considerations is the only and the completely natural thing to do. Of course risking one's political life. But with joy? Certainly not. With inner satisfaction, yes. A moral act in the Kantian sense? Perhaps.

Richness and diversity *must* be increased. This goal is so evident that to say it to oneself in words is superfluous. A labour party minister of fisheries resigned recently after having been able to establish strict quotas. She presumably had enough unpleasantness from the furious fishermen who had lost their jobs. Had she acted beautifully? I think the Kantian distinction works better for people who do not have the kind of power and responsibility of leaders in western democracies.

In short, there is little understanding that fostering *inclination* is essential in every aspect of socialization and acculturation, and therefore also in the global ecological crisis. Moralizing is too narrow, too patronizing, and too open to the question, "Who are *you*? What is the relation of your preaching and your life?" An invitation to act beautifully, to beautiful acts rather than talk about them, to organize society with all this in mind, may lead to a recognition and acclamation of such acts, and be a decisive factor that at last will decrease unsustainability. "Tell me about your beautiful acts today! Do the authorities encourage such acts?"

What I have offered for reflection is a small variation in our perspective, looking at what goes on in terms of a Kantian distinction. Thank you, Immanuel.

(Based on a lecture given at Hiram College, Ohio, May 1992)