Analyse & Kritik 30/2008 (© Lucius & Lucius, Stuttgart) p. 427–443

Gideon Calder

Ethics and Social Ontology*

> "Philosophers such as Frege and Popper, and more recently Jürgen Habermas have said that we should think of reality as dividing up into three different worlds. My own view is that we should never have started counting." (Searle 1998, 144)

> "Ethics is about human beings—but it is about what they are like, not what they like." (Eagleton 2004, 126–127)

Abstract: Normative theory, in various idioms, has grown wary of questions of ontology—social and otherwise. Thus modern debates in ethics have tended to take place at some distance from (for example) debates in social theory. One arguable casualty of this has been due consideration of relational factors (between agents and the social structures they inhabit) in the interrogation of ethical values. Part 1 of this paper addresses some examples of this tendency, and some of the philosophical assumptions which might underlie it. Parts 2 and 3 discuss two issues of growing prominence—disability, and environmental concern—due attention to which, I argue, highlights strong reasons why severing ethics from social ontology is neither possible nor desirable. I conclude by recommending a qualified ethical naturalism as a promising candidate through which, non-reductively, to reunite these two areas of theoretical focus.

0. Introduction

Much modern normative theory has tended to dismiss, quarantine or swerve around questions of ontology. This is for a number of reasons, some of them summed up neatly in this entry from the glossary of an excellent and unfashionable book by Scott Meikle, published six years after the inception of *Analyse & Kritik*:

> "*Ontology*
>
> The realm of *being*, or of what is or exists. It should be understood in relation to epistemology (q.v.) which concerns the realm of *knowledge*, or of what is known. The philosophical vogues of recent decades,

* Between the conception of this article and its completion, my father, Angus Calder, was diagnosed with the cancer from which he died in June 2008. It is dedicated to his memory, and however indirectly, I hope it catches something of the spirit of his own concerns. Points made here have featured in papers given to philosophy and sociology seminars at the universities of Lancaster, Birmingham, Lampeter and the West of England, and at conferences at King's College London, Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Bath, and Drexel University in Philadelphia. I am very grateful to those present in each setting for the wealth of helpful criticism received. Ineptitudes remaining are nobody's fault but mine.

> which have influenced conceptions of methods in the social sciences, have had for the most part a very restricted ontology which has been fused with their atomist epistemology (q.v.). That epistemology has set tight constraints on their preferred ontology, with the (desired) result that non-atomistic entities (e.g. social classes) came to seem problematical unless they could be reduced to the permitted atoms (individual agents), or in some way construed of them alone." (Meikle 1985, 178)

Meikle's focus is on the explanation of social phenomena. His target is methodological individualism—in Jon Elster's words, the doctrine that "all social phenomena—their structure and their change—are in principle explicable in ways that involve only individuals—their properties, their goals, their beliefs, and their actions" (Elster 1985, xiii). Atomist epistemologies, says Meikle, will admit for ontological consideration only those aspects of things which can be atomically reduced in the way that Elster describes. My own concern in this article is with the relation between ethics—the study of practical reasoning and the concepts used therein—and social ontology, or as Searle puts it, "the ontology of social reality" (Searle 1998, 143). Yet a central point I would like to develop echoes Meikle's. Characteristic of much recent normative philosophy has been a tendency not to admit for consideration what we might call *relational* factors: factors which pertain to the relations between (on the one hand) agents, their properties, goals, beliefs and actions and (on the other hand) other agents, or their situations, the social structures they inhabit, the built environments they make their decisions in, or the non-human world more generally. Another way of putting this is that the interrogation of norms has gone on at a deliberate distance from the textures of the social and environmental backdrops against which norms do whatever work they do, and with which, from the point of view of agents, they seem inextricably enmeshed. Thus the development of normative stances and frameworks often takes place at the expense of a lack of attention to the relational complexity of the social world. In Searle's terms, ethics has been put in one 'world', and social ontology in another.

Another set of boundaries is worth setting alongside this one—reflecting, this time, the academic organisation of inquiry. The student of ethics or moral philosophy will find routine lines drawn between meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics, with these being treated as distinct aspects of the overall field. Of course, this is helpful pedagogically, and reflects familiar enough variations in personal orientation. One could find oneself at home in conceptual discussions of the nature of moral disagreement, or be transfixed by the stand-off between consequentialists and deontologists, without much being made at all itchy by contemporary debates about abortion or torture or global justice. And *vice versa*, and so on. Yet a risk of any such division is that each part might come to seem autonomous. Applied ethics can be taught without any reference to meta-ethics at all. Meta-ethics can (just about) be grappled with entirely in abstraction from concrete examples or the 'real world'. And while in many senses normative ethics sits in between those two, the extent to which it genuinely mediates between

them, or integrates the insights gained from each, is by no means guaranteed by its place in the syllabus. This is more than just an institutional matter. The point is sometimes made that political philosophy has become less about politics, and more of a branch of moral philosophy. (A version of this argument has recently been put forward by Raymond Geuss, as we will see shortly.) What this means is not that political philosophy has come to mirror the techniques of applied ethics, but that its subject matter overlaps with that of normative and meta-ethics. Indeed, it might be said that political philosophy has become a branch of moral philosophy, formally at least. Thus there are generations of students of political philosophy whose understanding of the discipline, and what counts as doing it well, is curiously apolitical. A certain kind of fluency at the level of conceptual fine-tuning is achieved at the expense of a lack of dexterity in addressing current political concerns, or negotiating what one might otherwise expect to be the kinds of questions and problems which would lead one to study *political* philosophy in the first place. Deeming applied ethics a poor—somehow less weighty or worthy—relation of its more 'theoretical' counterparts, or indeed teaching it as if it were not itself entangled with 'deeper' theoretical issues, seems similarly discrepant. It might be that this detachment of theory from practice, or of concepts from their concrete application, is a curious, regrettable side-effect of the notion that different realms of inquiry exist in separate silos, or at least, with clear borders in between.

Whatever their formal appeal, then, and though they have their uses, it seems to me making too much of these different divisions—let alone cementing them into discrete 'worlds'—is ultimately neither accurate nor helpful. They do not reflect particularly well the kind of thing that practical reasoning is, and neither do they help us tackle the nuances of the 'values issues' we confront. This article is an attempt to defend these claims. In part 1, I explore some possible reasons for the ethicist's wariness of ontology, and some of the forms it has taken. In parts 2 and 3 I discuss two examples of issues—disability, and environmental concern—which have taken on a new and particular prominence in ethical debates since the late 1970s, and which—as I argue—provide especially good instances of why severing (applied) ethics from social ontology is neither possible nor desirable. These are issues, I shall suggest, where getting to grips with relationality is crucial to any satisfactory resolution of the particular kinds of challenges they pose. So my purpose is to try to show both that ethics and social ontology need to be addressed together rather than apart, and also that a sensitivity to relationality is a crucial element of any applied ethics worthy of the name. In the concluding sections, I draw some wider, though brief, conclusions about the nature and scope of normative theory in an attempt to identify which among current trends in the field of social philosophy give the most fertile ground on which now to work. I suggest that what Andrew Sayer has called a 'qualified ethical naturalism' is the best such candidate.

1. Normative Theory and Ontology

When it comes to claims about the social world, normative theorists are encouraged to be risk-averse. They will see an extravagance in making ontological commitments which the sober-minded ethicist should avoid unless they want trouble. This precautionary stance might stem from lesson-drawing from the wider range of recent philosophy, much of which has been hostile to metaphysics in the traditional register. 'Metaphysics' here refers to the ultimate nature of reality; whether cosmological, or social. While metaphysics has a bad name, or anyway looks a dangerous business, normative theorising remains as vital as ever, and has fresh and pressing challenges to face. So there is a kind of reassurance in insisting that the latter can (and should) advance without getting bogged down in the former. One can find examples of this resistance across a wide range of orientations and traditions which otherwise are in different ways at odds. One finds it in Kantianism, but just as much in emotivism. One finds it in Rawls, but just as much in Nozick. One finds it in Habermas, but just as much in his postmodernist critics. Indeed one finds it, as Raymond Geuss has recently elaborated, in the whole *way* in which much contemporary normative philosophy is done.

For Geuss, the problem lies in the assumption that "we start thinking about the human social world by trying to get to what is sometimes called an 'ideal theory' of ethics". As he depicts it,

> "This approach assumes that there is, or could be, such a thing as a separate discipline called Ethics which has its own distinctive subject-matter and forms of argument, and which prescribes how humans should act toward one another. It further assumes that one can study this subject-matter without constantly locating it within the rest of human life, and without unceasingly reflecting on the relations one's claims have with history, sociology, ethnology, psychology and economics. Finally, this approach proposes that the way to proceed in 'Ethics' is to focus on a very few general principles such as that humans are rational, or that they generally seek pleasure and try to avoid pain, or that they always pursue their own 'interests'... Usually, some kind of individualism is also presupposed, in that the precepts of ethics are thought to apply directly and in the first instance to human individuals." (Geuss 2008, 6–7)

Geuss's characterisation of this approach is helpful for my own discussion, because it highlights two themes which will recur here too. One is what he calls an 'epistemic abstemiousness' about much mainstream normative theorising. The social world is often regarded as a kind of unwelcome intrusion on the smooth-running of the systematising of norms; a source of non-conducive clutter or unnecessary detail. The other is that despite the urge to avoid social ontology, it nonetheless rears its head in any case as soon as the normative show gets on the road. The idea that we can avoid getting tangled up in 'the rest of human life' by working on the basis that (for example) human beings are self-interested

utility maximisers is in fact, a statement which undoes itself before the sentence is complete. For any such claim about human beings is itself an ontological commitment. If the theoretical system it supports runs the more smoothly by it being posited without reference to the messy stuff of social existence, then that, it might seem, is so much the worse for the plausibility of that system. I will say more about both of these themes as the article goes on.

Meanwhile it is worth addressing the kinds of assumptions which underpin the ostensibly diverse (indeed mutually antagonistic) approaches featured in the rather unlikely-looking gallery above. Some such operative assumptions are shared across these different perspectives; others are more closely associated with some than with others. Among the most prominent of them are these:

1. *Because there is a firm and clear distinction between facts and values, claims about what should be are entirely independent of claims about what is.* Thus no truth claim can entail a value judgement; you cannot, as for Hume, derive an 'ought' from an 'is' (Hume 1978, bk III, pt I). This claim might issue in a further, influential assumption: that moral language is essentially *action-guiding*, rather than being 'about' the world (Hare 1952; Mackie 1997). Thus the view that euthanasia is wrong is not an appeal to the 'way things are', or to properties of the world independent of the emotional attitudes of the view-holder; it is rather an expression of those attitudes, which swings free of any such ontological baggage.

2. *Because there is no firm and clear distinction between facts and values, we cannot expect to resolve normative disputes through an appeal to ontology.* Thus (see e.g. Putnam 2004, 28–32, 72–78) while some think that recourse to ontology will allow for ethical convergence around particular, undisputed factual claims, such a promise of consensus is ill-founded. Even if facts were by their nature the kind of thing we can come to agreement on (which itself, for Putnam, is a misleading picture), this wouldn't help us with the normative side of things.

3. *Ontological questions are contested and divisive, and public norms, for the sake of coherence, legitimacy and smooth-running, need to swing free of this complexity.* The most controversial values are those involving deep ontological commitments, for example concerning religion or other non-generalisable aspects of individuals' diverse conceptions of themselves and the world. We won't find consensus here, among what Rawls calls 'comprehensive doctrines'. We might, though, find more neutral, non-contested values on which to found public deliberation about matters of right and wrong which are "free-standing and expounded apart from, or without reference to, any such wider background" (Rawls 2005, 12).

4. *Mixing norms and ontology risks reification, reductionism and/or essentialism.* Reification here refers to "the moment that a process or relation is generalised into an abstraction, and thereby turned into a 'thing' " (Bewes 2002, 3). A typical claim in this vein will go something like this: if we base norms on ontological commitments, we thereby freeze and make static

> aspects of human being which are dynamic and resistant to pinning-down by single concepts. The concerns about reductionism and essentialism are related. To prioritise certain aspects of human or social being in the development of normative accounts, or to appeal (explicitly or implicitly) to 'essential' features therein will be to reduce, simplify or compress that existence in ways which exclude, silence or marginalise other aspects or forms of existence. Versions of these concerns feature particularly in discussions of gender, sexuality, and other aspects of difference which are taken to be open in ways which ontology-speak closes down (see, *inter alia*, Butler 1990; and for commentary McLennan 1996).

These assumptions are often quite distinct, have been differently influential, and come from quite separate theoretical directions. Even so, they converge in certain ways, and at certain points. Two such points are these. First: it is conceptually possible to sever normative debates from ontological questions. Second: this itself is normatively beneficial; it is better, more authentic or more pragmatically efficacious for us to take 'ethics' as something which operates in a separate world from that with which ontology is concerned.

I want to dispute both these claims. My responses to them, in outline, are that

1. Attempts in ethics to erase all dependence on ontological claims tend to fail, or unravel, and so undermine the ethical project at stake.

2. There are potentially pernicious implications of denying the ethical significance of ontological claims.

To argue for these responses requires, I think, two supplementary, supporting claims. One is that ethics and social ontology are 'about' similar/overlapping things. The other follows: that 'doing' ethics requires paying due attention to the kinds of issues which for adherents to points 1–4 above are not the kinds of places normative theory should go—or to put it another way, that the best ethical theory is that which is happy to get its hands dirty in that respect. From this angle, it is not *whether* but rather *how* we tackle questions of social ontology in ethics which is crucial. Any ethical agenda entails ontological commitments. The ways in which we might flourish or be harmed; the critique of gender hierarchy; the adequacy of models of human rights; the possibility of an ethical relationship with the natural environment—to approach any of these issues is to approach complex interplay between normativity and ontology. To flesh out these claims, I will take as examples two issues which—regardless of the general tenor of normative theorizing, or of trends in meta-ethics—have moved from the margins of attention to somewhere much more central in the last three decades. An anthology of applied ethics published in 1978 might very well have gotten away without including sections on either; indeed most of the best-known ones of that era did. These days, none would—or at least, none should. The two issues are disability, and environmental concern.

2. Example 1: Disability

Disability is a familiar part of the 'diversity issues' which have become standard discussion-points both in the academy, and in various kinds of institutional setting. Use of the term 'diversity' typically reflects a motivation to be more sensitive to difference. This motivation is not always clearly conceptualised, or articulated. In institutions such as universities, the significance of 'diversity' often becomes so elastic as to become shapeless—but nevertheless disability, along with ethnicity, features prominently under its heading. In normative theory, there is a kind of reverse tendency. Here there are fine-grained, nuanced considerations of 'difference', 'identity', and associated questions about justice and social values. But disability—unlike e.g. ethnicity, gender, religious belief, nationality, sexuality—is not a stock agenda item. In fact, it is very often not addressed—or if so, only indirectly—even in those texts most explicitly concerned with the recognition and negotiation of difference (see e.g. Young 1990; Honneth 1995; Fraser/Honneth 2003—landmark texts about difference and social justice in which disability receives one passing mention in total).[1] A question emerges: is disability definitively *different* from the other forms of 'difference' addressed by diversity committees, and political theorists? The most compelling answer is: yes and no. This answer tells us something about disability, but also about difference more broadly conceived, in relation to questions of ethics and social ontology. Rather than being marginal, discussion of disability affords us with particularly good, generalisable ways of thinking about these things.

Disability itself is difficult to categorise in any neat way. To an extent all of these points seem true, though perhaps in an unsettling way: There is no shared condition called 'disability'. There is no shared experience of 'disability'. There is no body of beliefs/attitudes definitive of being 'disabled'. There is no static or simple set of relational features (between individuals, or between individuals and their social/built environments) definitive of being 'disabled'.

Put these together, and the conclusion, it seems, is that there is no definitive way of *being* disabled. These are fairly bland empirical observations: different individuals and groups to whom the label 'disabled' is applied are not somehow joined by a shared phenomenological orientation towards the world or others, by a shared experience of these conditions, by attitudes or values, or indeed a shared experience of discrimination. One could say much the same about any social grouping, around culture or sexuality or nationality or gender or indeed anything else. Such points are relatively easy to make: in place of essences or a definitive 'sharedness', we find, at most, 'family resemblances'. Perhaps, often, we are struck by the absence even of these.

---

[1] As Phillip Cole has pointed out, Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* explicitly sets aside the question of disability, stating (in a footnote—Rawls 1972, 70, n. 9) that "[...] it is reasonable to assume that everyone has physical needs and physiological capacities within some normal range". As Cole also points out, although Rawls suggests that he may be able to "attempt to handle these other cases later", his theory of justice thus nonetheless "openly excludes those who are excluded from full and active participation in society" (Cole 1998, 45). This seems to me a particularly good (or rather, grim) example of the methodological limitations of contemporary political philosophy decried by Geuss—see section 1, above.

This very point might make such bland empirical observations seem rather point-missing (and perhaps naively atomistic). If civil rights movements depended for their coherence on the clean, clear identification of some such essence, they would all be doomed, conceptually and pragmatically. That there is no fixed or shared experience of 'being a woman' does not mean that gender oppression does not exist, or that individuals do not experience discrimination because they are women. In this vein proponents of the *social model* of disability have argued that there is a sharedness in being on the receiving end of 'disablism'. The social model conceives disability as arising not from physical impairment, but from discrimination, exclusion, and other features of the social environment. A conventional view of disability might see it as consisting in the absence of a capacity or ability (whether physiological or psychological) considered to be part of a normally functioning life for any individual. This serves both to individualise disability and to medicalise it. Disabled individuals are regarded as patients, with deficiencies or ailments which, in principle, are there to be made good, fixed or cured. One purpose of the social model is to shift the politics of disability away from the notion that it represents a kind of tragic personal affliction, and towards questions of social relationality. The former is itself implicated in patterns of discrimination: "for many disabled people, the tragedy view of disability is itself disabling. It denies the experience of a disabling society, their enjoyment of life, and even their identity and self-awareness as disabled people." (Swain et al. 2003, 71) Thus the sharedness underpinning the 'disabled community' is located in an interest both in reforming a physical environment configured without due regard for the needs of disabled people, and in challenging the social construction of the disabled in mainstre am discourse and policy (Smith 2005, 554–556).

The effect here is to shift the register of disability politics from the biological to the social. This itself is perceived as crucial in the construction of a disability rights movement, based on a *political* understanding of the issues which disabled people face. Hence, as Tom Shakespeare sums a widely-held view within the movement: "to mention biology, to admit pain, to confront our impairments, has been to risk the oppressors seizing on evidence that disability is really about physical limitation after all." (Shakespeare 1992, 40) The shift, though, is ambiguous. For some proponents, the social model serves as an all-encompassing, stand-alone explanation of the causes and effects of disability. Thus Mike Oliver argues that "disability is *wholly and exclusively social* [...] disablement is *nothing to do with the body*" (Oliver 1996, 41). Impairment is bodily; disability is relational. But for others, disability is a product of the *relationship between* impairment and the social environment—for example, for Vic Finkelstein (1980), the "ensemble of capitalist social relations".[2] This second seems to me both a richer explanation, and one with wider resonance—precisely because of its focus on this 'space between'.[3] An appeal to the interests invoked by to shared 'disability rights' seem to require, to be normatively compelling, a cashing out not just

[2] See Terzi 2004 and Cole 2007 for an illuminating critical exchange on the relation between the philosophical underpinnings of the social model and its political uses.

[3] See Calder 2005 for a wider discussion of how epistemically individualist approaches will

of individual interests, but of interests arising from relations between features of individuals, the environments they inhabit, and the attitudes and perceptions of others.

The social model has been remarkably successful, having travelled relatively swiftly from something fairly wacky-sounding to the status of institutional 'common sense'. My own University has adopted the social model as the institutional definition of disability; current UK equality and discrimination law has been revised substantively in light of it. Publicly, the ethics of disability are couched in its register. Disability has become a term referring to the shared interests of those with particular impairments in transforming their social environments, and in shifting the attitudes of those, in different social contexts, with whom they deal. But this story, though remarkable, carries with it pressing philosophical complexities. In what do such interests consist? From whence do they derive? Partly for reasons alluded to in the passages by Meikle and Geuss cited above, ethical theory traditionally struggles with relationality. As mentioned in the Introduction, two dimensions of this neglected relationality are these: relationality between subjects (or intersubjectivity); relationality between subjects and their environments. Disability theory, via the social model and the discussions to which it has given rise, starts with these relationalities, and won't let them go. What it seeks to articulate are particularities about the ways in which people might be disabled, and their normative implications. But what it emphasises in the process is that, given our vulnerabilities and our dependency on others, disability is an *inevitable* feature of a human life. It is a matter of degree, rather than kind: as Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, "a matter of more or less, both in respect of degree of disability and in respect of the time periods in which we are disabled" (MacIntyre 1999, 73).

Returning to the points raised earlier about the difficulty of neatly categorising 'disability', it seems that similar points might be made in respect of any of the following: 'good health'; 'womanhood'; 'ethnicity'. The implication might seem, in each case, that because there is nothing definitive about any of these categorisations, the categories themselves dissolve away—such that using them at all is erroneous, or (worse) amounts to a kind of coercion. The fluidity of the social construction of disability might, in a familiar sense, lead some to conclude that it doesn't 'really exist', or that it is altogether socially contingent. But this conclusion, in my view, is misplaced. That there is nothing definitive about being disabled in an essentialist sense, that everything significant about it is a matter of degree and of blurred lines, is not to say that the whole condition is simply perception-dependent. Disability is the sole product of neither the impaired body nor the oppressive society: the ontological implications of the social model seem rather that is a kind of emergent property of the interplay between body and society. Thus what is 'different' about disability as a form of difference is the particular way in which body and society inter-relate. Attention to the particularities of this is what 'doing justice' to disability consists in—descriptively and normatively. What we find when we explore disability is a particular confi-

---

miss ontologically relational factors—and of examples of cases where it is those relational factors, or this 'space between', which is of crucial ethical significance.

guration of the relationship between the individual body and its environments. We find a particular combination of the universal condition of embodied, vulnerable selfhood and the contingencies of the relations into which our bodies are immersed. That there are such relations is inevitable, as is the relevance to their negotiation of normative questions about autonomy (dis)empowerment and recognition. But how this pans out for each individual is something which cannot be addressed without due attention to social structures, dominant perceptions, and the rest of the foci of the disability rights movement. So we find a messy mixture of the generalised and the ungeneralisable. Far from being particular to disability, as a 'diversity issue', this messy mixture is part and parcel of each thing which comes under that heading.

For these reasons, disability seems a particularly salient example of the kind of issue which, to be thought about ethically, requires that we are already thinking about social ontology. If we were not, we would simply miss the kind of issue it is.[4] If we return from here to the qualms about involving ontology in ethics mentioned in the previous section, we will notice, I think, some of the strange, delimiting places to which such qualms might lead us. To follow this through, consider the following sentences, which might be based on elements of each of the assumptions depicted there:

1. Ethical concerns about disability are not 'about' features of the (social) world, but are expressions of our own emotional attitudes.

2. Even if facts about our social environment were the kind of thing we could come to an agreement on, this wouldn't help in resolving the kinds of ethical concerns raised by disability.

3. We can find consensus on basic values around issues such as disability without recourse to potentially divisive, controversial ontological discussions about the nature of disability itself.

4. To talk about disability rights through an appeal to the 'social reality' of disability is itself to essentialise a particular group ('the disabled'), to treat their interests as somehow 'natural', and reduce otherwise diverse and complexly textured aspects of human being under convenient, and thereby false, generalisations.

Each of these positions, it seems to me, is (differently) ill-founded. I will return to the reasons why in section 4, after looking at our second example of an ethical issue.

---

[4] This is not to deny, of course, that much discussion of disability among ethicists goes on in ways avoiding issues of social ontology, explicitly or otherwise. Such discussion goes on all the time. In fact, at conferences on ethics and disability, it's quite likely that discussion will take place in two quite different registers: one in which the social model is taken as a starting-point (or at least, seriously), and one in which it is dismissed or ignored. This makes for some weird discussions, especially when both camps are sitting round the same table, discussing the same paper. Still, there are insights to be gained from it, especially about how not to do disability ethics.

3. Example 2: Environmental Concern

Since the 1970s, debates in environmental ethics and politics have worn well-trodden paths over a set of questions which can be summarised like this. Does 'doing justice' to the environment—to the particular kinds of issue raised by environmental concerns—require a wholesale reorientation of existing normative frameworks, categories of social justice, etc? Do we need to shift to an eco-centric paradigm—and away from the habitual anthropocentrism of traditional conceptions of value—in order fully to appreciate, and address, the kinds of issues those are? Are notions of 'rights' or 'welfare' to any extent transferable between humans and other species, or indeed, more holistically, to environments and ecosystems? Or, to take climate change as an especially pressing focal point of environmental concern: does tackling this require not just high-stakes political initiatives and a significant injection of will among agents, but a deeper re-jigging of the way we 'do' normative theory, and of our orientation towards the non-human world? And to take liberalism as an example of a dominant, in-place normative framework: can it bear the strain of accommodating ecological concerns, or would it need a fundamental overhaul, or to be replaced altogether, for such concerns to be genuinely addressed? As with the previous discussion of disability, it seems to me that these questions are key questions both within their particular field of application, and beyond it. Thus the kinds of questions which confront environmental ethics even in getting started, and assume special urgency there, are questions which apply more generally to the whole kind of business that (applied) ethics is.

Two such questions would be these. Is the moral case for tackling climate change dependent on, or independent of, the will of agents to do something about it? And does this really *matter*, other than to meta-ethicists and others whose job it is to worry about such things? One crucial thing to notice about environmental ethics is that here, these questions have practical as well as intellectual import. Thus our capacity to do something about climate change, and the persuasiveness of the moral case to do so, are closely intertwined. This is not just because, in the familiar phrase, 'ought' implies 'can'—so that any obligation to do something about climate change implies the possibility of doing that something. It is also because the very nature of the problem itself raises issues which sit complicatedly across any divide between 'applied', 'normative' and 'meta' ethics. Thus notwithstanding any wider tendency to wedge these apart, environmental ethics, whatever its hue has always found it necessary to keep them in closer proximity. This is largely because tackling environmental issues requires tackling questions about the relation between ethics and ontology head-on. These questions are, in an upfront way, what environmental ethics is *about*. Thus the range of approaches which have been taken in environmental ethics—whether analytical, deep ecologist, eco-feminist, anthropocentric, non-anthropocentric or otherwise—converge in tackling these questions, divergent though their different takes on them might be.

One way of thinking about the way such debates pan out is by distinguishing realist and constructivist approaches, both in ethics and in ontology. Constructi-

vists in ethics are those who believe that the realm of the normative is constructed through-and-through by the volitional activity of agents (see e.g. Korsgaard 1996). For ontological constructivists (or constructionists), there is only this or that conception of 'x' ('x' being any aspect of 'reality' sometimes claimed to be conception-independent), determined by this or that culture; no sense can be given to 'x' independently of the cultural process of constructing conceptions of 'x' (adapted from Hailwood 2007, 134). These two positions are counterposed by two kinds of realism. Realists in ethics are those who believe that the realm of the normative consists, at least in part, of truths which are prior to, and independent of, our deliberations. For ontological realists, reality exists independently of our beliefs about it; there is a 'what the world is like' apart from our constructions of it. While our *knowledge* of reality may be inevitably value-laden and theory-laden, reality itself is ontologically separate from such constructions. The 'moral' versions of both constructivism and realism are in some respects, to some extent, independent of their 'ontological' counterparts—though in practice, it is arguable that they run more smoothly in tandem with each other. In any case, the terrain between these four points—the two forms of constructivism, and the two forms of realism—is that on which many of the most important and illuminating debates in environmental ethics have played out.

Though there is a full range of available points between these coordinates, environmentalists are unlikely to be contructivist about both morality and reality. There are well-rehearsed reservations about both, such that even the affirmedly anthropocentric will hesitate to throw their lot in wholly with constructivism on all counts. One obvious concern is that an account of values as necessarily and exclusively constructed on the basis of the dispositions and interests of agent *a priori* devalues those living things which are incapable of entering into this process—not just animals, but other elements of the non-human environment which might arguably possess value in ways other than their instrumental value for human agents. Some environmental ethicists will defend a version of this—for example Mark Sagoff, for whom environmental values stem from moral and aesthetic judgements, refined and nuanced, but inescapably human-centred (Sagoff 1988). A different, and differently niggling allegation is that the best constructivism can do is to generate obligations among humans *with regard to* the environment. But these can always be overridden by other obligations that humans have towards one another (De-Shalit 2000, 63–64). Thus constructivists end up being *perniciously* anthropocentric—or at least, are unable to put any obstacles in the way of pernicious anthropocentrism.

I do not want to attempt here to do justice to the full range of issues at stake between constructivists and realists in these respects. But anyway we find here an especially good example of how ethics, to be done, needs to get its hands dirty in the messy stuff of social ontology. One way—significant, I think—of summing up the undercurrent of these objections to constructivism is that it fails to account for relationality—or at least, to account for it in a satisfactory way. Again, relationality as used here denotes two different factors: relations between individuals, and relations between individuals and their environment (natural or built). It seems an ontological claim that both of these factors pre-

exist any given individual, and partly constitute the character and powers of the individuals subject to the relations in question (see Collier 1999, 60). Here is what relationality looks like, from the point of view of constructivists. Firstly, for ontological constructivists: if it pertains, such relationality cannot be constitutive of relations themselves, but must instead be determined by processes of discursive construction. Secondly, for moral constructivists: deriving as it does entirely from the volitional activity of agents, the construction of norms is not constrained in any way to pay any attention to such relationality. Nothing other than the recognisers of value themselves, or their mental states, can be considered as valuable in their own right (see Fox 2006, 59ff.). This includes relations between individuals, and between individuals and their environments.

Now climate change, if it is a harm, is a harm which cannot be accounted for without taking relationality on board. Thus it is a harm consisting in, and affecting, not simply individuals but their inter-relations, and the relations between individuals and their environment (both natural and built): relations between generations; relations between countries, and the inhabitants of countries; relations between agents and the social structures they inhabit. To understand the particularity of climate change as an ethical and political issue is to appreciate these (potential or already-existing) effects. And full-on constructivism runs into trouble at this point. Ontological constructivism implies a scientific anti-realism about climate change: i.e., the 'reality' of the latter consists not in mind-independent causal processes, but in its construction through culturally dependent frameworks of thought. And ethical constructivism cannot address climate change except in so far as it impinges upon the will of agents, i.e., it cannot be considered as a harm outside the will of agents. It seems that wholesale constructivism cannot account adequately for the nature, causes and effects of climate change as a process, because it rules out *a priori* the possibility of such factors existing independently of their construal via a given set of cultural parameters. If its harms are to any degree independent of the volitional activity of agents, then arguably, constructivism seems to face problems in (as it were) getting its head around the normative implications of climate change.

Maybe so—very probably, I would say. But really, for our purposes here, this is not the crucial issue. What is most important is the register in which such discussion—in terms of the routine 'departments' of ethics, encompassing the meta-, the normative and the applied—will take place. Issues of moral status, and the nature and source of value, arise inevitably in the practice of environmental ethics. And these issues, in turn, reflect questions—to echo Eagleton, in the second epigraph above—about the relationship between what human beings like, and what they are like. Such questions sit squarely across the line between ethics and social ontology, and their vitality comes precisely from this. And this, again, highlights how far removed these sentences (again, reflecting the qualms about ontology discussed in section 1 above) might seem from the specific, urgent concerns of debates about the ethical implications of climate change.

1. Ethical concerns about climate change are not 'about' features of the (social) world, but are expressions of our own emotional attitudes.

2. Even if facts about our natural environment were the kind of thing we could come to an agreement on, this wouldn't help in resolving the kinds of ethical concerns raised by the prospect of climate change.

3. We can find consensus on basic values around issues such as climate change without recourse to potentially divisive, controversial ontological discussions about the nature of environmental degradation itself.

4. To talk about the ethical implications of climate change through an appeal to the 'reality' of the impacts of environmental degradation on human beings is itself to essentialise a particular group ('human beings'), to treat their interests as somehow 'natural', and reduce otherwise diverse and complexly textured aspects of human being under convenient, and thereby false, generalisations.

These points echo those in the concluding part of the previous section, though here and there some words have been substituted. If they seem equally (though perhaps differently) odd, this suggests that something is equally (if differently) amiss when we articulate disability and climate change, as ethical issues, in what seems to be the register of the ontology-wary variant of normative theorising which seems, for many, and for whatever reasons, to have become the approach of the canny.

For each of the four points, in both cases, come across as radically point-missing in the different contexts in which they apply. They locate the subject-matter of ethics at a distance from ontological questions which, while perhaps deemed 'safe', seem (at best) to loosen its grip on the issues at stake, and at worst to make it an entirely self-referential enterprise. In each case, the gap might be bridged by allowing ontological questions to enter back in. Thus our emotional attitudes ('what we like', to use Eagleton's phrasing), are indeed a feature of the social world, and of 'what we are like'. The question of climate change arises precisely because of the particular precarious balance between different aspects of the world—human needs and ambitions, and the environment which might enable or thwart their satisfaction or realisation. Developing an ethical response to disability is indeed, to thrown right into controversial debates about the nature of social being. To tac kle climate change without considering generalised human needs and capabilities, in a way deemed 'essentialistic' by some, would seem to miss the point about what gives the issue the particular kind of urgency it has: the threat posed by environmental degradation to the scope for flourishing both of humans, and of other life on earth.

4. Conclusion: A Qualified Ethical Naturalism

The examples just addressed are put forward not because they somehow capture the full gamut of ethical theorising, or exhaust the range of its applications, or pick out meta-ethical issues which somehow translate, cleanly and without adjustment, across all other areas in which ethical issues press upon us. Rather, my point is that they help highlight questions which, while of clear ethical

significance, are difficult to address adequately without opening up ontological issues, particularly around relationality and the inseparability of the normative from other fields and questions. It is important, too, that relationality itself is more complex, layered, nuanced and dimensional than the ways in which it has been invoked here might suggest. Both intersubjectively and between individuals and their non-human environments, it is (for example) to some extent perception-relative, and so some extent not. Such relations are the product of different forces, some natural and some cultural, and stemming both from social structures and individual agents. Each of these exerts effects. My own position would be that we cannot account for the way relations are purely in terms of any one such force. But that aside, both disability and climate change are examples of the complexity of such relations, their properties, powers and effects. If we are thinking about ethics, we are already thinking about social ontology, and if we are thinking about social ontology, we are already thinking about the ways in which such forces enable and constrain agents and other beings, allow for flourishing or thwart it, and encourage or stifle attention to the good, which itself is a normative notion to be fleshed out through consideration of what constitutes flourishing.

While many very prominent normative theorists would resist such a conclusion, others—especially those working in a more or less neo-Aristotelian vein—would embrace it. MacIntyre's work embodies it, as does that of theorists such as Russell Keat and John O'Neill, featured in this issue, who have done immeasurably more than this article might muster in cashing out the implications of this kind of claim. The work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum—among other proponents of a 'capabilities' approach—provides prominent examples of normative theory that is willing to grapple with and think through ontological questions about what, substantively might count as and allow for deeper and more inclusive flourishing (see, inter alia, Nussbaum 1992; Sen 1999). All of such approaches might be described as naturalistic—and part of my own case here is that this orientation is entirely apt. Ethics is best understood as naturalistic in the following, qualified senses. It should recognise (i) that the 'stuff' of morality (for instance, the significance of certain human needs) is not reducible to its cultural construction, apperception or construal; and (ii) that moral discourse inevitably ranges beyond itself, in the direction of substantive, content-ful claims about the way things are (a 'way' which includes the natural elements of our, and the world's existence). From this angle, again, ethics is inseparable from questions of social ontology. As Andrew Sayer puts it, "the very meaning of good or bad cannot be determined without reference to the nature of human social being" (Sayer 2004, 102). It is such a project which is denied by those for whom ontological questions are inconvenient or out of bounds.

Sayer's work is significant because a central critical focus in recent texts has been the tendency of social scientists to drive a wedge between the positive and the normative, and so to remove the place of normativity—of evaluation—in the minutiae and the broader sweep of social life (Sayer 2006, 240; see also Sayer 2005). Sayer's critique of dualisms of fact and value is directed towards social scientists whose self-image places them in a kind of comfort zone on the 'facts'

side of the dichotomy, where facts are deemed 'non-valuey'. My own concern here has been with the tendency of normative theorists to view themselves as similarly insulated, but on the other side—a place where values are 'non-factsy'. As I hope to have shown, neither place is stable, nor as desirable a location as convention might have it. To say that we can, and do, travel between them is not to say that ethical claims or positions can simply be 'read off' ontological ones, or that the former follow cleanly from the latter. Neither does it mean that the appraisal of ethical values is exactly the same kind of business as appraising claims about the chemical composition of floorboards. The two are quite distinct aspects of a complexly textured reality; distinct enough to be reducible one to the other only by an extravagantly imperialistic gesture. Notions of needs, e.g., will cover both 'natural' and 'social' elements. Like our vulnerabilities—as is borne out in the debates on the ethics of disability and environmental concern—they are complexly textured, reflecting potentials and constraints which are modified by both natural and social processes. For my money, the most robust currents of thinking in the past three decades have been those which, in Geuss's terms, have located ethics not beyond, or above, but within the rest of human life.

Bibliography

Butler, J. (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York
Calder, G. (2005), Relationality and Evil: Judging Bystanders, in: M. S. Breen (ed.), *Minding Evil: Explorations of Human Inquity*, Amsterdam
Cole, P. (1998), *The Free, The Unfree and the Excluded: A Treatise on the Conditions of Liberty*, Aldershot
— (2007), The Body Politic: Theorizing Disability and Impairment, in: *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24, 169–176
Collier, A. (1999), *Being and Worth*, London
De-Shalit, A. (2000), *The Environment Between Theory and Practice*, Oxford
Eagleton, T. (2004), *After Theory*, Harmondsworth
Elster, J. (1985), *Making Sense of Marx*, Cambridge
Fox, W. (2006), *A Theory of General Ethics*, Cambridge/MA
Fraser, N./A. Honneth (2003), *Redistribution or Recognition?*, London
Geuss, R. (2008), *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton
Hailwood, S. (2007), Landscape, Nature, and Neopragmatism, in: *Environmental Ethics* 29, 130–151
Hare, R. M. (1952), *The Language of Morals*, Oxford
Honneth, A. (1995), *The Struggle for Recognition*, Cambridge/MA
Hume, D. (1978), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford
Korsgaard, C. (1996), *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge
McLennan, G. (1996), Post-Marxism and the 'Four Sins' of Modernist Theorising, in: *New Left Review* 218, 53–74
MacIntyre, A. (1999), *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, La Salle
Mackie, J. L. (1977), *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth
Meikle, S. (1985), *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, La Salle

Midgley, M. (2003), *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience*, revised edn., London

Nussbaum, M. (1992), Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defence of Aristotelian Essentialism, in: *Political Theory* 20, 202–246

Oliver, M. (1996), Defining Impairment and Disability: Issues at Stake, in: C. Barnes/G. Mercer (eds.), *Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability*, Leeds

O'Neill, J. (1994), Humanism and Nature, in: *Radical Philosophy* 66, 21–29

Putnam, H. (2004), *Ethics without Ontology*, Cambridge/MA

Rawls, J. (1972), *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford

— (2005), *Political Liberalism* (expanded edition), New York

Sagoff, M. (1988), *The Economy of the Earth*, Cambridge

Sayer, A. (2004), Restoring the Moral Dimension in Social Scientific Accounts: A Qualified Ethical Naturalist Approach, in: M. S. Archer/W. Outhwaite (eds.), *Defending Objectivity: Essays in Honour of Andrew Collier*, London

— (2005), *The Moral Significance of Class*, Cambridge

— (2006), Understanding Why Anything Matters: Needy Beings, Flourishing, and Suffering, in: J. Frauley/F. Pearce (eds.), *Critical Realism and the Social Sciences: Heterodox Elaborations*, Toronto

Searle, J. R. (1998), Social Ontology and the Philosophy of Society, in: *Analyse & Kritik* 20, 143–158

Sen, A. (1999), *Development as Freedom*, New York

Shakespeare, T. (1992), A Response to Liz Crow, in: *Coalition*, September, 40–42

Smith, S. R. (2005), Equality, Identity and the Disability Rights Movement, in: *Critical Social Policy* 25, 554–576.

Soper, K. (1995), *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human*, Oxford

Swain, J./S. French/C. Cameron (2003), *Controversial Issues in a Disabling Society*, Buckingham

Terzi, L. (2004), The Social Model of Disability: A Philosophical Critique, in: *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21, 141–158

Young, I. M. (1990), *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton