

The Nature of Authority in Nature

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Everything from the clothes we wear to the food we eat is related to the natural world around us. Why do we Montana residents wear a fluffy jacket while walking to class in the middle of December? What makes us decide on athletic shorts in July? Although these questions offer a simple response: Montana winters are colder than a Tibetan tin toilet top and Montana summers are hotter than hells pepper patch, they indicate that the natural world influences the way we act on a daily basis. We certainly have the freedom to rock a bikini in the freezing cold and a wool coat in the summer's heat, but nature (in an extremely persuasive fashion) cautions us not to. A similar concept can be applied to what we eat, do people in the American Midwest simply have an unparalleled desire to eat an abundance of corn? Do residents of New England just love the taste of lobster more than those who reside in Arizona? For some, this may be the case, however if we examine these trends on a population level it becomes clear that we eat what is available to us. Again, nature surely grants us Montanans the freedom to attempt to produce and eat pineapple year round, however it imposes conditional parameters that limit us to play by its rules. Nature, by way of its processes and conditions, grips society with pure authority, and as stewards of our world we have a moral obligation to maintain a healthy symbiotic relationship with the earth and its inhabitants. Furthermore, as the increase in humanity's potential to manipulate the world around us increases, it is important to understand that our moral authority is still limited by natural provisions.

In order to adequately examine the way that nature holds and imposes authority over humankind, it is imperative to understand what authority means and how it applies to the world and its wide range of systems. Furthermore, after establishing the authority

that nature has, it is important to examine our moral obligation to sustain our world and respect its authority. In her article *Conceptualising 'Authority'* Naomi Osorio-Kupferblum begins defining authority by contrasting it with power. She outlines the difference between the two concepts by pointing out that an action dictated by power is “making others do something they would otherwise not be doing...even if such action may consist in forcing someone else to do something.”¹ Osorio-Kupferblum goes on to explain action imposed by authority “will be brought about voluntarily and by that person’s choice, without coercion or the use of any force by the person possessing authority.”¹ Osorio-Kupferblum then compares authority to respect. At first glance these two concepts seem to be unrelated, however after further examination there are a few bridges that tie the ideas together. The principle concept that brings together authority and respect is the idea that both rely on volunteerism and cannot be attained by means of force or coercion. As outlined by Osorio-Kupferblum, respect differs from authority in that “we can respect a person – find that person ‘respectable’, to name the counterpart property – without their ensuing any sort of action on our part. Authority, by contrast, consists in the other person’s action.”¹ Although there is a distinct difference between respect and authority we can say that respect is a necessary component of authority, being that in order for us to complete an action dictated by an authority figure, we must first respect that person. Tying these ideas together, author Osorio-Kupferblum defines authority as “someone else’s voluntarily doing something they would not have done otherwise, something they believe that person would approve of. So while power can be taken, authority has to be offered. Power requires no one’s consent, authority consists in a

¹ Osorio-Kupferblum, Naomi. (2015). *Conceptualising 'Authority'*. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*. 23. 1-14.

consent that is moreover acted upon. It cannot be usurped, it can only – with some luck – be earned.”¹

The article *Conceptualising ‘Authority’* by Osorio-Kupferblum provides an excellent outline to the concept of authority and how it manifests itself within people. Authority, as she describes it, commands voluntary action by the people under its jurisdiction. Furthermore, she expands to say that power can be taken, whereas authority by its nature must be offered. In turn, this offering must be brought about through means of directed action without coercion or violence. Initially, the concept of authority seems to live exclusively within human limitation, however after examining the world around us it is apparent authority is not as exclusive as we think. Osorio-Kupferblum’s definition is orientated to address the way authority develops in interhuman relationships. However, to pinpoint authority within the realm of abstract dimension, we must adopt a slightly different lens.

When breaking down the derived definition of authority there are two main components: action and freedom. For authority to be present, an action must occur in response to, or as a reaction of the authority in question, and this action must be completed by the free will of the people engaging with it. With this in mind, the natural world serves as an excellent example of an authority that has heavily influenced humankind throughout our expansive history. For example, even at the most basic level humankind has revolved its urban development around the resources provided by the natural world. Initial attempts at civilization were directed by particular climates that could sustain life. The elements of the world dictated the action of civilization, while providing each individual the freedom to assemble as they saw fit. This example can be

expanded to how the world is oriented today. Major cities are created around and dependent upon the natural world. We tend to develop in areas abundant in natural resources such as food, water, oil, and ideal climate. To go a step further, it is not unreasonable to attribute the success of humankind to the natural process of evolution. Our development as a species can be thoroughly broken down as our response to the natural world. Even though this process occurred over millions of years of mutation, adaptation and selection, it is undeniable that these processes shaped the human race. With these ideas in mind, it is abundantly clear that the authority of the natural world has played a key role in our development and success.

Some may argue that the imposition of ecological barriers constitutes coercion, being that hunger and other related natural feelings are a reasonable force that is enacted upon us. If this assumption were to be accurate, then nature would simply hold power over its people, not authority. Coercion can be seen throughout the world today. On a macroscale, this concept is displayed by dictators who use violent and oppressive laws to control the thoughts, education, and actions of their citizens. This example is not limited to our current day and age, it is a concept that stretches beyond recorded human history. On a microscale, coercion can be seen by the way humans interact with one another. A classic elementary level example, would be a bully making one of his/her victims give up their lunch money after school. From the examples we see in the world today, it is easy to deduce a primary aspect that correlates directly to the way coercion presents itself within a relationship; whether it is between a group of people, or a government and the people under its jurisdiction. In any case, coercion must manifest itself within the want, need, desire, or will of a separate entity. If we look at our bully example, the desire being

enacted upon, stems from the bullies urge to either gain money, exhibit some form of control over another being, or increase his/her street credentials with the local swingset gang. The victim of this action would be under coercion by the bully. On the flip side, if our young potential victim saw a fellow student in need of monetary assistance and he makes the decision to share his lunch money with that student he would not be influenced by means of coercion, because the desire to help manifested itself from his own desire. Looping this idea back to the example of nature using hunger as a coercive force, it is easy to see that hunger is an experience within ourselves, and it presents to us as our own desire to eat. From the perspective of our playground victim, our feeling of hunger is analogous to seeing our classmate in need, not being forced to give up our money. In essence, the feeling of hunger we all know is not a force enabled by nature to achieve some sort of goal, it is the imposition of the natural laws we are all deeply entangled with.

The next potential threat to the authority of nature comes under the analysis of natural disasters and the violent consequences that come with them. One could argue that nature forces us to bend to its will by means of violence and potential destruction. For example, the southern United States has experienced hurricanes that have decimated homes and forced people to move to new locations. Furthermore, here in Montana we have seen wildfires do the same to residents on the eastern portion of the rocky mountain front and throughout the rest of the state. These natural disasters are nothing new, they have been around longer than humankind itself and have impacted the world throughout its journey so far. In his article *Theorizing Democracy and Violence*, author Adrian Little offers two definitions of violence. The first definition he uses describes violence as “an

intentional act of excessive force,”² the second states that violence is “an instrumental means to achieve an end”². At first glance these definitions seem to have little in common, they lack a fundamental bowtie. However, the common ground between these two definitions presents itself when an anthropocentric lense is applied. The first definition operates under the important stipulation that intention must be established in order for an act of excessive force to be violent. Storms and other natural disasters have hurt people, damaged property, and killed people and animals. However the distinction that natural disasters hold is they do not have the capacity for intention, they are not conscious entities. Wildfires do not target those who have cut down the most trees, waves do not attempt to punish countries with the highest levels of pollution, and rivers do not flood factories in attempt to stop their wasteful tendencies. Without intention, violent action cannot occur. There is certainly destructive action, however this is fundamentally different than violent action.

The second portion of the definition of violence contradicts natural processes altogether. First, nature does not act in instrumental ways, it acts in response to physical phenomena. For example, earthquakes occur in response to tectonic plate movement, they are not a step in achieving an overarching goal. Next, natural disasters and other actions we see in nature are not occurring in a manner that is attempting to achieve an end. Even without humanity nature will continue its activity, it does not have a hypothetical ending or a way to consciously pursue one.

²Little, Adrian. "Theorizing Democracy and Violence: The Case of Northern Ireland." *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 111 (2006): 62-86.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41802340>

For the greater half of human existence, the natural world has acted as a guide and generous provider, enabling us to thrive within healthy parameters. Human beings are vulnerable to nature's authority, exposed to her elements, and molded by her evolutionary touch. However, as our species has advanced, so has the technological world we reside in. Consequently, this technological advancement has enabled exponential growth within its own development. In turn, humankind's relationship with the natural world is undergoing a dangerous metamorphosis by migrating our perceived existential context outside of natural provisions. This existence we are claiming is firmly grounded with the idea that we are above other species in terms of innovation and cognition. The problem with this framework is that it plants seeds of superiority, and through ignorance, the manifestation of the mindset that the world is our subordinate. By examining the fragile relationship between humanity and the natural world, it is evident that in order to maintain a symmetric relationship, we need to accept that we exist within the ecosystem, not above it.

Ever since the establishment of human understanding in the foundations of biology, ethical considerations of these understandings and their applications have paralleled the field. As biological science has progressed, the need for ethical examination surrounding the field has gained momentum in terms of complexity and priority. The dynamic relationship between biology and ethical analysis is present in fields such as medicine, biochemistry, human genomics, and ecology. For the purposes of this paper I will examine the relationship ethics has with both human genetics and ecology.

Genetic modification is embedded in human history, and it has served the purpose of increasing our agricultural yield. Until recently, genetic modification has been limited to plants and other easily manipulated organisms, such as single celled bacteria.

However, as our knowledge of the human genome has dramatically increased, the possibility of human gene editing is now at our fingertips. According to *Ethics and Medicine, An International Journal of Bioethics*: “In 2013 a new technology was applied to human cells, setting a record in scientists’ ability to control the genetic makeup of offspring,”³ pushing the first domino in a new era of biology. The basic procedure for this technology is the removal of an abnormal or mutated segment of DNA sequence, and its replacement with an optimal DNA sequence. With this technology, the potential to eradicate malicious disease from an individual and their future offspring is theoretically applicable. While this potential proves extremely tempting to indulge in, *Ethics and Medicine, An International Journal of Bioethics* conveys voices of concern by “Nobel laureate David Baltimore and 17 other distinguished researchers, lawyers, and ethicists published a collective letter in *Science* to “Strongly discourage . . . any attempts at germline genome modification for clinical application in humans”³. The ethical implications associated with the use of this technology are of the utmost priority, as they will play a pivotal role in humanity for generations to come.

Aside from ethically balancing the possible risks vs. rewards of gene editing in humans, another consideration needs to be taken into account: Do we have the moral authority to override and manipulate the natural foundations within ourselves and our

³ Sas, Daryl F, and Hannah Martin Lawrenz. 2017. "CRISPR-Cas9: The Latest Fashion in Designer Babies." *Ethics And Medicine: An International Journal Of Bioethics* 33, no. 2: 81-95. *Philosopher's Index*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 12, 2017).

offspring? From a Christian perspective, this ethical dilemma is often times articulated as a question of self idolatry. Do we override God's construction of human beings for our own vision of an ideal life? *Ethics and Medicine, An International Journal of Bioethics* believes that "In demanding certain genetic traits in their children, rather than submitting to God's all-wise providence, people seek to place themselves above Him"³. Removed from a Christian perspective, the action of manipulating our own genetic makeup and the genetic makeup of our offspring is the ultimate testament to humanity placing itself outside of the provisions provided by Nature.

In terms of ecological ethics, excessive pollution serves as a testament to the reality humans strive to place themselves in with regard to the remainder of the world. In essence, giant landfills, smog filled air, and oil spills are our badge of economic efficiency. Typically, the issue of pollution is primarily examined when it shows negative impact on the dollar. However there are much more important implications to consider.

In his work *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis brings these issues to light, he writes:

Some forms of pollution are part of people's daily experience. Exposure to atmospheric pollutants produces a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor, and causes millions of premature deaths. People take sick, for example, from breathing high levels of smoke from fuels used in cooking or heating. There is also pollution that affects everyone, caused by transport, industrial fumes, substances which contribute to the acidification of soil and water, fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and agrottoxins in general.⁴

Pollution is an issue that affects each and every resident of this planet, human and non-human. It is not as dramatic as war or as infuriating as oppression, but it is just as detrimental to our world. Pope Francis goes on to state that: "The climate is a common

good, belonging to all and meant for all. At the global level, it is a complex system linked to many of the essential conditions for human life.”⁴

When looking at these issues from a global perspective, it easy to feel detached from the issue of climate change. Unfortunately, through denial and crafty political circumvention, here in Montana many residents do not feel as if they are directly affected by the shifting climate. This couldn't be further from the truth. According to a peer reviewed article entitled *Drought adaptations and climate change beliefs among working ranchers in Montana*: “Climate change impacts to farming and ranching will likely influence rural futures around the world and potentially compromise global food security.”⁵ Pollution, and in turn climate change, present many challenges to primary industries that contribute Montana’s economy, and in turn the people who work hard within those industries. For example, lower late summer streamflow means that fishing outfitters will lose valuable time in their working year. An even more widespread example is the agricultural industry. With rising temperatures, drought becomes more common, this contributes to higher water prices for farmers and in turn higher grocery prices for the remainder of the state. Beyond farming, environmental impacts reach further than the public expects. In fact, a peer reviewed article entitled *Managing for climate change on federal lands of the western United States: perceived usefulness of*

⁴ Catholic Church, and Sean McDonagh. 2016. *On care for our common home: the encyclical of Pope Francis on the environment, Laudato Si'*.

⁵ Yung, Laurie, Nicky Phear, Alayna DuPont, Jess Montag, and Daniel Murphy. 2015. "Drought Adaptation and Climate Change Beliefs among Working Ranchers in Montana." *Weather, Climate & Society* 7, no. 4: 281-293. *Environment Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 24, 2017).

climate science, effectiveness of adaptation strategies, and barriers to implementation

writes:

In the U.S. northern Rocky Mountain region, the United States Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are responsible for managing public lands that account for roughly 13 million hectares in Idaho and 11 million hectares in Montana (Gorte et al. 2012). Climate change is likely to impact the forests and rangelands managed by these agencies and alter important ecosystem services such as fresh drinking water sources, recreation, and timber production, all of which are integral to local communities and economies (e.g., Pederson et al. 2006).⁶

The negative effects of climate change and pollution teach humanity that they are deeply integrated within the environment, not above it. The convolution surrounding this connection stems from the fact that in most cases, actions that negatively impact the environment are perceived as isolated from their own repercussions. For example, if a rancher decides to use an outlawed pesticide to enhance his overall production yield, he/she does not understand that this process is hurting the fly fishing industry and in turn his community. In many cases that cause pollution, the consequences are so far removed from the action that justification is easy, and often times, negative repercussions are not even considered. An article entitled *Drought Adaptation and Climate Change Beliefs among Working Ranchers in Montana* shows how this concept is embodied in within ranching culture:

hardships caused by drought were seen by ranchers as inseparable from a broader set of economic, social, and environmental pressures interacting at multiple scales, forces or barriers that create an “adaptation envelope” that shapes future options and trajectories (Wyborn et al. 2015).⁵

⁶Kemp, Kerry B., Jarod J. Blades, P. Zion Klos, Troy E. Hall, Jo Ellen Force, Penelope Morgan, and Wade T. Tinkham. 2015. "Managing for climate change on federal lands of the western United States: perceived usefulness of climate science, effectiveness of adaptation strategies, and barriers to implementation." *Ecology & Society* 20, no. 2: 375-388. *Environment Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 24, 2017).

Attitudes of ranchers throughout Montana reflect that the isolation from climate change is enforced by many different social and political frameworks.

This concept is reflected throughout history, and has been indirectly enforced by ideas that were created before contemporary knowledge of humankind's technological potential was realized. In his article *What remains of man* Vallori Rasini briefly explains the perspective that humanity has embodied ever since history has been recorded: “Judaic Christian thought has certainly favored the idea of man who is entitled...to behave as the absolute lord over the earth, over a flora and fauna which is inferior to him in every way.”⁷

Now that a technological potential to decimate nature in the pursuit of innovation and human advancement has been reached, consequences for such destruction is beginning to burden humanity; pollution again acts as a perfect example. “The profound mutation that occurred over the centuries with the strengthening of technology produced a radical transformation of the ways and ability of man to intervene in nature”(Rasini). As a species we are failing to recognize how big the impact of these interventions are. This technological shift has counteracted our previous models for a our relationship with nature which “...once represented a great danger against which man had to deploy forces, it now exhibits a critical vulnerability which was previously unimaginable.”(rasini)With this shift in mind, we are now faced with the consequences of the exploitation of nature. resources are growing thin, and our spiritual connection to the earth is being engulfed by

⁷Rasini Vallori *What Remains of Man and of the World: Reflections on the Age of Ecological Crisis, Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics*, 2014

a technological wave. This “advancement” is happening at the expense of the earth, further isolating humankind from the reaches of the biospheric realm.

With the shift in vulnerability between the human race and the earth, it is important to analyze why we need to remain within the natural parameters set forth by the world. Without these parameters humankind will distance its gap from the remainder of the world and will inevitably run out of resources to sustain our course of action. Fossil fuels present an excellent example of where the importance of natural preservation and human interest collide. On one hand, we see oil so embedded in our society that it has become a necessary driving force for transportation that is essential to human success. Without cars, planes, busses, or boats the human economical infrastructure would undoubtedly implode. With the availability of oil running thin, it would be in humanity's best interest to investigate a more sustainable mode of propelling ourselves at high speeds through the atmosphere. In addition to economic interest, humankind has a lot to gain morally by sticking to more sustainable methods of energy extraction. In recent years oil has created more wealth discrepancy and worldly conflict than any of us would care to admit. By shifting back away from the fierce competition that unsustainable energy enables, as a society, we can orientate ourselves closer to a morally stable existence. In the article *What Remains Of Man and the World*, Vallori Rasini elaborates on how we can shift towards a more sustainable path:

...a serious call for individual and collective responsibility is inevitable. There is no reasonable motivation for encouraging a “farewell to nature” (with or without a capital N). On the contrary: it is essential to direct every force, even the simplest and blandest, towards the greatest possible respect for what we consider in the world to be natural (even naive) and extra-machine. Furthermore, it would be advisable to abandon that widespread idea of existential superiority (and of eternity)⁷

This shift back towards the natural direction to some degree is necessary for the survival of the human race by means of resource conservation. This is undoubtedly the principal argument in conservation of the natural world.

Orientating our perspective towards being part of the ecosystem is far from a static approach, “for better or worse, we have become part of the balance of nature and can no longer simply withdraw”⁸ An active approach must be universally selected because as humans, we still have a role to play within the ecosystem. Analogously, we should attempt to treat the natural world like a doctor treats his/her patient in that we should attempt follow the principle of nonmaleficence as well as the principle of beneficence. The principle of nonmaleficence is essentially stating “do no harm,”⁹ and the principle of beneficence is stating a doctor “within the limits of his ability and judgment, is always to act for the good of the patient”⁹. “The goal is to overcome the conqueror mentality and to embrace a land ethic in which an activity is right insofar as it preserves the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community and wrong when it tends otherwise”¹⁰. It is our duty to actively facilitate an environment that is not limited to humanities optimization, but also invisions a complete world. “The concept of completeness is related to the concept of a mature ecosystem. Completeness suggests

⁸ STOREY, DE. Nietzsche and Ecology Revisited: The Biological Basis of Value. : *Environmental Ethics: An Interdisciplinary Journal Dedicated to the Philosophical Aspects of Environmental Problems. Environmental Ethics: An Interdisciplinary Journal Dedicated to the Philosophical Aspects of Environmental Problems.* 38, 1, 19-45, Mar. 1, 2016. ISSN: 0163-4275.

⁹ Ortiz, Graciela. "The Ethics of Voluntarily Stopping Eating and Drinking." *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 607-617. *Philosopher's Index*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 12, 2017).

¹⁰ Henning, Brian G. "From the Anthropocene to the Ecozoic: Philosophy and Global Climate Change." *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 40, (September 1, 2016): 284-295. *Philosopher's Index*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 13, 2017).

maximum diversity, maximum self-reliance, maximum dynamic equilibrium”¹¹. If this optimal relationship is vigorously strived for, the physical ecosystem would not be the only benefactor. In the pursuit of changing their perspectives and actions, individuals will most likely develop a relationship with nature that allows them new opportunities to pursue a healthy lifestyle.

In addition to allowing us to understand ourselves, nature grants us the potential to remove ourselves from the technological world, and step back into the biosphere in times where it can be overwhelming and strenuous. Being removed from technology allows us to reflect on the important aspects of life such as interpersonal relationships, spiritual relationships, our own mortality, and as noted by Vallori Rasini: our own identity. Furthermore, being closely intertwined with nature can prove to be physically uplifting and healthy. Nature provides a variety of opportunities such as: hiking, swimming, backpacking, fishing, biking, kayaking, and rock climbing. All of these recreational activities stimulate a physically healthy lifestyle and do not directly involve the technological lifestyle we have are so accustomed to. Stepping outside of our comfort zone and allowing ourselves to be surrounded by the natural world allows us the personal freedom we are constantly longing for and prevents us from neglecting our duty to respect the authority found in nature when we return from our journeys.

Another way to view the natural world and the changes it is currently undergoing is to look at it from a humanitarian point of view. By excessively contributing to pollution and not recognizing the full extent of its impacts, we are not only placing

¹¹ Cheng, Chin-Fa. "Environmental Ontology in Deep Ecology and Mahayana Buddhism." *Environmental Ethics: An Interdisciplinary Journal Dedicated To The Philosophical Aspects Of Environmental Problems* 38, no. 2 (June 1, 2016): 145-163. *Philosopher's Index*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 13, 2017).

humanity on a pedestal above the remainder of the natural world, we are placing the economic and physical burdens upon the shoulders of the poor. By ignoring the way that our own pollution affects others, we are treating them as subordinate to ourselves, fracturing the moral code we all claim to uphold. Therefore, respecting the natural world and understanding how our actions against the world affect others is an essential component for us to maintain our morality.

Currently, there are many local and international organizations dedicated to solving the issue of climate change and shifting humanity's attention back towards an attitude of respect for the authority in nature. These organizations tackle this daunting task in a variety of ways: policy advocacy, research in sustainable energy, education about the environment, and advocacy for lifestyle shifts. Much like the effects of climate change, efforts to combat our extreme anthropocentric outlook and way of life can be seen every day. If you are an undergraduate student, chances are you know at least one person majoring in environmental or biological science. If you have ever driven long distances across the United States you have most likely seen wind turbines, solar panels or a large dam. These sustainable modes of energy are all around us, and the potential for their universal application is not only desirable, it is necessary. As citizens of this earth we have a moral obligation to our planet, and to one another to walk alongside those working tirelessly to ensure the authority of nature is respected, for the good of all humanity.

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