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Stefan BARGHEER, *Moral Entanglements: Conserving Birds in Britain and Germany* (Ville, University of Chicago Press, 2018)

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In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche derides scholars naïve enough to search for the origins of our moral commitments in their function. Simply because a moral belief helps to sustain the social order does not mean that it emerged to serve this role: “the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility... lie worlds apart” [77]. Instead, a true “historical science” of morality looks not to function but to *practice*. How is morality used? By whom, when, and why? Whatever its historical accuracy, Nietzsche’s polemic threw down the gauntlet to those of us seeking to understand how contemporary moral commitments arise. Virtues do not innocently disclose their origins. We must look instead to the social contingencies from which they originated, however unflattering the ancestry.

Stefan Bargheer’s masterful book *Moral Entanglements: Conserving Birds in Britain and Germany* engages in its own moral debunking project. Wielding a pragmatist approach as he investigates the genealogy of his moral subject, Bargheer’s explanatory adversary is not functionalism but rather those who emphasize the causal power of moral motivations. Our moral commitments, Bargheer argues, do not arise from moral discourse, ideology, or abstract principles. Morality instead arises from action and, crucially, “the institutional settings that facilitate this action” [20]. This pragmatist insight powers a several hundred-page exposition that spans two centuries, two countries, and countless organizations to follow the unlikely development of what, at first blush, appears to be a straightforward moral commitment: bird conservation.

*Moral Entanglements* opens with a contradictory observation. The predecessors to modern-day bird conservationists, Bargheer argues, were bird hunters: “The very same people who initially killed birds and contributed to their extinction were also the first to protect them” [9]. More surprising still, the transformation from bird destruction to bird conservation was not a product of moral enlightenment or rational reflection. Rather, this moral transformation was unpremeditated, something one-time bird hunters more or less stumbled into as the technology, institutions, and politics surrounding them reshaped

the manner in which they engaged with birds. Bargheer's key insight is that, to the extent that a moral discourse around bird conservation developed, it developed *in the course of*—rather than prior to—a change in how individuals interacted with birds. This is not an idle theoretical corrective. For those of us who examine moral discourse, Bargheer's argument entails that, by the time our object of analysis enters the social arena, the most important causal action has already taken place.

To develop this argument, Bargheer compares the evolution of bird conservation in Britain and Germany and shows how different systems for valuing birds were structured by national institutions. In Britain, bird collecting—which transforms from bird hunting to bird watching—is embedded in an orientation that values birds as objects of *play*. By contrast, the German relationship to birds is economic and utilitarian: birds, valued as sources of food or tools for pest-control, are firmly embedded within the world of *work*. Moral discourse about bird conservation develops in Germany only as a reaction to economic valuation. In a particularly compelling chapter that stands out even in this meticulously researched book, Bargheer chronicles how the introduction of new technology in the countryside—cameras and nesting boxes—upended the traditional way bird collectors engaged with birds. In Britain in particular, the very same individuals whose fascination with bird collecting led them to shoot birds with guns came to instead shoot them with cameras. The pursuit of bird bodies for museums was replaced by the pursuit of bird images in the wild.

Can Bargheer's carefully researched historical narrative sustain his more general theoretical critique regarding the explanatory insignificance of moral discourse? Throughout *Moral Entanglements*, Bargheer is at pains to minimize the relevance of moral discourse, painting it primarily as a strategic maneuver that actors use to convince *others* of why bird conservation matters. "Abstract moral principles" are "post-hoc" "justifications" chosen to communicate one's commitment to conservation, but have little relevance to the actors themselves [256]. Yet those of us who are suspicious of the claim that moral discourse is really such epiphenomenal window-dressing might question whether Bargheer's case gives discourse its fair due. Indeed, the justificatory role that Bargheer assigns to moral discourse is precisely what scholars of morality—Thévenot and Boltanski, for instance—point to as essential for understanding the process through which discourse works. That is, moral discourse is most relevant not in conditions of consensus but in conditions of contention, when we need to justify our positions to

others or spur them to action because collective moral projects require coordination. Perhaps it was precisely because—as Bargheer reminds us—“birds are good to play with” that their conservation did not require a thicker moral discourse on the part of their champions. Enthusiasts seeking to preserve the object of their enthusiasm offered reasons why non-enthusiasts should also care, and some of those reasons happened to be moral. But are we willing to relegate moral discourse to explanatory insignificance in other, less pleasurable, domains? Does moral reasoning really do no work in spurring action to, say, donate organs, volunteer, or politically organize?

And while moral reasons might not have been central to bird conservationists, this may not mean that moral motivations are so generally trivial. Charles Taylor’s rationale for why articulated notions of the moral good are worthy of historical analysis, for instance, is not that those reasons provide the best explanations for individual action. Rather, those reasons are fundamental to understanding the construction of the self. Taylor’s claim is that it is through the taking of moral stances—through articulating to ourselves and to others what it is that we stand for—that we constitute our selfhood. Moral reasoning then, even of the post-hoc, justificatory variety, might not be just “empty talk” but a crucial domain in which individual agency is constructed.

In addition to Bargheer’s theoretical intervention in the role of moral action and discourse, *Moral Entanglements* raises a question of how we should conceptualize the relationship between human society and nature. In particular, Bargheer takes issue with Geertz, arguing that our principal theoretical approach to the environment relegates it to a mere reflection of human society. For instance, the Balinese cockfight is better understood as a forum for contestation in human social hierarchy than as a way in which animals serve to produce meaning in their own right. Bargheer instead wishes to credit the birds themselves as having independent agency. Yet while Bargheer convincingly demonstrates that it is birds’ unique features—their numbers, their aesthetic characteristics—that explain the popularity of bird watching (as opposed to, say, insect collecting), *Moral Entanglements* sticks close to the domain of ornithology. Here, I often found myself wondering whether bird conservation (as play or as work) could indeed be understood as an instantiation of a more general social orientation in the two countries. For instance, how does bird hunting fit with British class hierarchy, where hunting has historically been a ritual for elite social reproduction?

Ultimately, these are the kinds of questions that necessarily arise from grappling with a compelling, provocative theoretical contribution, and future work on the development of moral commitments will be unable to ignore the challenge Bargheer has set. Approaching purported moral motivations with skepticism, and digging deeper into the practices out of which moral commitments arise, will make for a stronger, more rigorous sociology of morality. But the implications of Bargheer's work go beyond even these considerable contributions. In providing an instance in which one of our more cherished moral commitments—in this case, to nature and the environment—owes its existence not to enlightenment but to practice and to play, Bargheer destabilizes any moral authority we may feel over our supposedly morally impoverished predecessors. Bargheer's argument, then, forces us to rethink the attitude we take to historical moral diversity, particularly when progress is better attributed to historical luck than to reformist reflection. In this, Bargheer's debunking project should not only leave us unsettled but compelled to advance this research project—to tackle with a pragmatist spirit future questions as to how we have arrived at our contemporary notions of the good.

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