Embodied ethics: difference, politics, and the dissolution of good and evil

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A Thesis
entitled
Embodied Ethics:
Difference, Politics, and the Dissolution of Good and Evil
by
Annabel Coca
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree in Political Science

Dr. Renée Heberle, Committee Chair

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The University of Toledo
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An Abstract of

Embodied Ethics:
Difference, Politics, and the Dissolution of Good and Evil

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in Political Science

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In this thesis I examine the possibility of an alternative ethical orientation by analyzing the ethical and political implications of conceiving of ethics as an embodied phenomenon. By “embodied” I am referring to the role that the body as a biological entity plays in housing and creating experience. The thinkers at the center of this analysis contend that the unique perspective that arises from one’s embodied history is more accurately understood as “a” world rather than a view of “the” world. I argue that the ethical possibilities implied by this perspective of embodiment challenge the utility and defensibility of thinking of ethics in terms of judgments involving what is right or wrong, good or bad, or what one ought to do. The rejection of certain differences that takes place through such judgments would be inconsistent with the idea that each person’s world is as equally real as another’s, since each world forms each person’s equally real reality. Instead, these types of exclusions could be viewed as necessities of constructing viable communal groupings, particularly political communities.
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Abstract

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Chapter 1

Distinguishing Embodiment

In this thesis I examine the possibility of an alternative ethical orientation by analyzing the ethical and political implications of conceiving of ethics as an embodied phenomenon. By “embodied” I am referring to the role that the body as a biological entity plays in housing and creating experience. In this approach to embodiment, each moment of one’s existence emerges from the history of interactions between one’s bodily structures and one’s external circumstances. For this thesis, “ethics” does not refer to the specific values that people hold, but rather it is when one considers and discusses the meaning of those values and comes to conclusions about them. The conception of “values” used in this essay includes what some term “morality,” but also encompasses political, aesthetic, philosophical, and general feelings of what is important.

The thinkers at the center of this analysis contend that this unique perspective that arises from one’s embodied history is more accurately understood as “a” world rather than a view of “the” world. I argue that the ethical possibilities implied by this perspective of embodiment challenge the utility and defensibility of thinking of ethics in terms of judgments involving what is right or wrong, good or bad, or what one ought to do. The rejection of certain differences that takes place through such judgments would be
inconsistent with the idea that each person’s world is as equally real as another’s, since each world forms each person’s equally real reality. Instead, these types of exclusions could be viewed as necessities of constructing viable communal groupings, particularly political communities. In these communities, ethics could function as a way of recognizing others by understanding the possibilities and limitations that emerge from the physical structures of these others’ bodies. In other words, individuals and groups endeavor to understand the worlds that others inhabit so that they can know how to build a world with others. Rather than discussing how others should act, discourse about ethics could consider how people could act.

This thesis has particular relevance for discussions concerning democracy and violence. Countries with democratic forms of government face unique difficulties in governing their populaces because as John Keane writes in *Violence and Democracy* “democracy, considered as a set of institutions and as a way of life, is a non-violent means of equally apportioning and publically monitoring power within and among overlapping communities of people who live according to a wide variety of morals” and which “minimally requires public respect for others who are equal but different.”¹ When “different” refers not just to dissimilar or contrasting morals or points of view, but instead to views that are seemingly diametrically opposed, as is the case with certain political issues or systems of government, finding out how individuals and political communities can come to coexist without violence while respecting others as equals becomes even more challenging. The ethical and political perspective presented in this thesis communicates one way to think about those differences.

Certain ethical and political orientations challenge democracy more than others. One such perspective occurs when individuals have an actual or nearly unwavering conviction that their beliefs are correct while others are wrong, and another involves those people with the belief that their values and viewpoints ought to be enforced on all people. Values associated with morality and ethics are often phrased as universals, that is, they are often intended to apply to all people without exception. These values are also often considered to be the absolute truth because they are believed to be the word and all-knowing god or just common sense, which can possibly make the use of violence or oppression of others who do not conform with those values to appear even more easily justifiable. These two inclinations could pose risks to democracy as a form of government and as way of life if these individuals actively strive to impose those values on others because it can make it more difficult to coexist with those who “live according to a wide variety of morals.” A central question that this thesis asks is whether it is possible to consider another way to think about our differences and about ethics, values, and politics that may pose less risks and what this different orientation might look like.

In order to introduce the main ideas of the ethical orientation that I am proposing, I will relate it to the ethical theory put forth by Judith Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, in which she asks the question of whether and how it would be possible to be held morally accountable if it were not possible to give a complete and true account of oneself.\(^2\) Butler proposes that, since giving an account of oneself would require explaining the social conditions in which one develops, to give even an incomplete account a person must in effect be a social theorist.\(^3\) This thesis elaborates on why this

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\(^3\) Butler: 8.
might be the case, but further suggests that social theorists would be well advised to also take into consideration natural science, since the social emerges through our biological structures. Although Butler’s approach is not rooted in embodiment, its conclusions resonate with many reached in this thesis. The similarities arise in large part because her theory emphasizes the significance of the social conditions within which one develops, which, as I will explain in the following chapters, are central to understanding humans as biological beings. Analyzing Butler’s view also helps to draw the distinction between theories that acknowledge bodies, as hers does, and ones that could be said to view the body as what fundamentally makes theorizing possible. In a sense, it is the difference between having a body and being a body.

In Chapter One, I will turn to Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch’s theory of enactive cognition to present the biology that I will refer to in the rest of the thesis. From there, I will examine Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus*, practical sense, and practice, which he considers to be embodied phenomena, through the lens of enactive cognition to describe how the values, beliefs, and practices that make up ethics might function within embodied subjects. Toward the end of Chapter 1 and primarily in Chapter 2, I will outline an ethical framework and a related political perspective, which I will refer to as “embodied ethics,” that abandons the traditional ethical judgments of good, bad, right, wrong, or ought, yet strives to be both in theory and in practice a possible method for constructing politics and ethics that meets our needs and aspirations as social beings with irreducibly personal subjective experiences. To begin the second chapter, I will consider Butler’s perspective on judgment and relate it to Friedrich Nietzsche’s stories about slave and noble moralities, using both their views to help
articulate alternatives to traditional “ethical” judgments. Then, referring primarily to an exchange between Ernesto Laclau and Butler about equality, exclusion, and democratic politics, I will describe what a possible relationship between ethics and politics could be. I will conclude by analyzing how the ideas of this thesis might apply to concrete political actions.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler argues that giving a complete and true account of oneself, as might be expected from someone in order for him or her to be considered morally responsible, is impossible. Her reasoning is that any account would be limited by the necessary opacity of the subject that arises due to its history within the social conditions of its development, particularly the existing system of norms and one’s relationships with others.\(^4\) It is a history that can never be fully known since one cannot recall one’s origins, and a history that is continually compounding.\(^5\) This thesis, in part, elaborates on this history that Butler describes by explaining how it is affected by one’s embodied experience. However, instead of framing questions of ethics as existing and emerging from within the existing social conditions, as Butler does, this thesis argues that it is also the very physical structures of the mind and body that, along with social norms and other features of the external environment, shape one’s subjectivity, and which ultimately determine what form those social norms and relationships with others will take.

Butler contends that, even at our most idiosyncratic, we are irrevocably tied to these social conditions, whether it is through the norms that facilitate and shape our subjectivity or through the other individuals who have become interiorized in the course

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\(^4\) Butler: 40, 80.
of our past and present interactions. Our particularities, however, would take on another
dimension if considered as embodied, because those peculiarities would be said to
emerge from the durable yet malleable physical structures of our own unique body. This
distinction would suggest that our idiosyncrasies could be analyzed not only as mental
experiences, as Butler often does through psychoanalytic frameworks, but would also
have to be analyzed as physical experiences. These physical changes produce more than
just a unique perspective about the world or about reality as is implied by Butler, but
instead could be seen as producing a different world or reality. Each world or reality feels
normal and filled with certainties, even though each is contingent on the physical
structures one is born with as a product of evolution in combination with one’s
interactions with the external world. Recognizing the limitations of giving an account of
oneself would include becoming cognizant of this idea that one’s own views in regards to
values and ethics are part of one’s particular world or reality. This realization becomes a
way to recognize others when one becomes aware that others experience a similar level
of normalcy and certainty even when their views seem to be antithetical to one’s own.

One’s singularity and its relationship to the social world are also connected to the
importance Butler places on recognition in her ethical theory. To give an account requires
addressing others, which implies recognizing those others. Similarly, being heard by
others requires that one also be recognized by those others. For Butler, recognition is
required even in moments of judgment. According to the ethical orientation of
embodiment described in this thesis, recognition differs in that, rather than just
recognizing others, the particular worlds that are produced by one’s mental structures

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6 Butler: 7, 80.
7 Butler: 21.
8 Butler: 46-9.
would also have to be recognized. The nature of judgment also changes because whatever
criteria are used for judgment only reside within the particular worlds of each individual
even if there may be criteria that are shared among individuals who have similar
histories. The people and behaviors that are being judged and the act of judging itself
would also have to be understood as emerging from the structures of the body.
Chapter 2

From Biology to Sociology

In this chapter I give an account of how human biology affects what we understand ethics to be by considering the biological features of the human mind, as described by enactive cognition, and relating them to the sociology and anthropology of Pierre Bourdieu. Enactive cognition or enactivism is an approach to understanding the mind that integrates biology, psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy. The details of these theories may seem overly technical at first, but are necessary for understanding the biological aspects of how the mind functions and will be referred to throughout the thesis.

The point of departure for the enactive approach to the understanding of cognition is the “sensorimotor structure of the perceiver,” because “reality is not a given: it is perceiver-dependent, not because the perceiver ‘constructs’ it as he or she pleases, but because what counts as a relevant world is inseparable from the structure of the perceiver.”9 One example that illustrates the relevance of this approach is the experience of color. There is a fairly high correlation between light intensity and wavelength

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composition and the perception of color, but it is not a one-to-one correspondence.\textsuperscript{10} For example, an object that is reflecting the same wavelengths with the same amount of light intensity can appear to be a different color depending on the context in which it is viewed.\textsuperscript{11} Enactivism would explain that the color one perceives does not ultimately depend on the actual “color” of the object, since in this case the “color” is the same, but instead it is the structures of one’s sensorimotor system that in the end determine one’s perception of color.\textsuperscript{12} It would follow that how one perceives social norms and ethical values would also depend on the sensorimotor structures of the perceiver and the context in which it is experienced.

The context of a particular situation is especially important for enactive cognition because the approach contends that the sensorimotor system is made up of “a network consisting of multiple levels of interconnected, sensorimotor subnetworks.”\textsuperscript{13} These subnetworks can be anatomically separate and are composed of neurons.\textsuperscript{14} Varela et al. explain that, for example, according to research about the physiology pertaining to visual perception, vision appears to emerge from several independent and somewhat anatomically separate structures, such as those responsible for form, surface property, and three-dimensional movement, that work together to create a coherent and seamless visual experience.\textsuperscript{15} This understanding of the body and mind provides a plausible explanation for why seemingly distinct phenomena influence one another as in the case of the perception of color affecting and being affected by various other phenomena, such as

\textsuperscript{10} Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 160.
\textsuperscript{11} Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 160.
\textsuperscript{12} Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 160.
\textsuperscript{13} Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 206.
\textsuperscript{14} Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 162.
\textsuperscript{15} Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 162.
motion, music, and emotion.\textsuperscript{16} In the same way, one’s values, beliefs, and practices at the center of ethical inquiry would be composed of various interconnected subnetworks that structure much of one’s experience without one’s awareness, and also function without conscious intention.\textsuperscript{17} Interconnected subnetworks related to values, beliefs, and practices might involve areas of the brain associated with emotion, rationality, mood, stress, and habitual ways of thinking and reacting. Just as our eyes and the rest of our sensorimotor system involving perception of color developed through evolution, research in evolutionary psychology suggests that how one perceives events is also related to evolution, such as capacities for empathy, altruism, and perceptions of whom one is obligated.\textsuperscript{18}

According to the theory of enactive cognition, the process through which these subnetworks of the sensorimotor system developed evolutionarily and continue developing as we engage in the world is called structural coupling.\textsuperscript{19} Structural coupling in the most general sense refers to what happens “whenever there is a history of recurrent interactions leading to the structural congruence between two (or more) systems.”\textsuperscript{20} To illustrate what is meant by structural coupling one can consider any time a new skill is gained. At first it might be difficult or impossible to produce a note on a flute, but with practice and instruction producing the note can become easy. Being able to play the note is a manifestation of structural coupling because one’s sensorimotor structures have changed in way that has produced a state of harmony or congruence with the task of

\textsuperscript{16} Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 160-64.
\textsuperscript{19} Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 151-6.
\textsuperscript{20} Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding (Boston: Shambhala, 1992), 75. (Henceforth abbreviated as Maturana and Varela, TK).
playing the flute. The specific way that one is able to play the note depends on the physical structures of the player, such as the shape of the mouth, capacity of the lungs, previously developed cognitive structures from having learned to play other instruments, and the structure of the nervous system coordinating all the actions, just to name a few.

Values and beliefs are similar to the muscle memory involved in playing a flute in that they are often spontaneous and automatic reactions to a situation that emerge from forged pathways in the brain’s neurons. For example, witnessing or hearing about a violent event might cause a person to react automatically with a statement or feeling of how wrong that action was. A different automatic response might be to empathize with the victim of the violence, but to also wonder what circumstances led the attacker to behave in such a way. Just as it is easier to play the flute if one has played similar instruments, behaving or believing in certain ways would be easier if one has behaved in similar ways in the past. For example, responding to the suffering of others in one’s community with empathy as opposed to indifference or contempt might make it easier for one to extend those feelings to people in other countries or even to other species.

Part of this coupling also occurs between cognitive structures and the external environment, which includes everything that is outside of the physical structures of one’s own body, including cultural and sociological forces. The external environment in terms of human perception, however, cannot be understood as an independent entity, according to enactive cognition, because whatever appears to exist in the environment is always the result of one’s history of structural coupling with it. This coupling can also occur between systems within larger systems, such as between cells or between the

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21 Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 151.
22 Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 204.
various subnetworks in the mind. In terms of ethics, the values, beliefs, and practices associated with ethics would emerge from structural coupling as well, since one’s beliefs would emerge from a history of changes to the physical structures of the mind. How one’s beliefs or values change when coming into contact with other values or beliefs could also depend on the history of changes that have previously structured the mind.

One’s experience of the world via structural coupling feels, in the words of Varela et al., “given, unshakeable, and unchangeable” and also remarkably normal, yet is entirely contingent on the evolution of one’s species and on the specific history of the individual. One may attribute a sense of normalcy to the phenomenon of perceiving color; however, what is “normal” for other species or even other humans who are colorblind or who culturally interpret color differently, for example, would be very different, even strange. According to the theory of enactive cognition the reality we perceive, such as color, which seems so real and true, is contingent on the structure of one’s body. If those structures change or if they had developed differently through the course of evolution or within one’s lifetime, one’s reality would be different.

Related to this possibility of different realities, enactivism describes cognition as “bringing forth a world.” This world that one perceives comes into being through the history of actions that one performs through the interaction of one’s sensorimotor structures with themselves and with what is external to oneself. One’s present reality emerges from one’s unique history, which is at least slightly different from that of all others. This history produces a different reality or a different world for each person. Not only would one’s sensory experience be different from that of others, but one’s values

23 Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 151.
25 Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 206.
and attitudes as well.\textsuperscript{26} One’s particular beliefs about ethics would likely be perceived by oneself as normal and real, yet would be entirely contingent on one’s biological and social history.

There are several relevant epistemological implications of enactive cognition. According to Maturana and Varela, knowledge, as manifested through descriptive capacity, would be “relative to the cognitive domain of the knower,” which is “always the reflection of the ontogeny [“the history of structural transformations of a unity”] of the knower.”\textsuperscript{27} Furthermore, it would be “impossible to step out of this relative descriptive domain through descriptions.”\textsuperscript{28} What this work implies is not that one can only know the world through one’s specific perspective, but that the only world that one can ever know is the world that emerges from one’s specific history. One’s mind would not be able to perceive the external world as it is or even through the lens of one’s perspective.\textsuperscript{29} Instead, the external world, in terms of cognition, would be said to emerge as a result of the interactions between one’s mind and the external world. Enactivism is not arguing that the external world does not exist, but rather that whatever one perceives as the external world can never be separated from one’s physiological and social history. At each moment, a world is emerging from one’s history through the structures of one’s body. One’s world, although entirely contingent and subjective, is very much real in the sense that it is the world that one inhabits and interacts in and which comprises one’s reality. This reality, including one’s values and beliefs, is contingent on the processes of

\textsuperscript{26} Varela: 62.
\textsuperscript{28} Maturana and Varela, AC: 123.
\textsuperscript{29} Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 202
one’s physiology and the interaction between it and the external environment. Although one may feel certain that one has found some specific “truth” about the world, certainty could not be a criterion for identifying truth because one’s experiences produce regularities that seem real and durable, but that are always contingent on one’s history.\textsuperscript{30} If “truth” is supposed to reflect facts about reality, being able to find “truth” would also be in question if “reality” is contingent partially on the results chance mutations that determined one’s physiology. To assert a certainty or a truth that one has found within one’s reality would be to negate another person’s reality if it is filled with different certainties and truths.\textsuperscript{31} Although there may be some who share one’s beliefs about certain issues, there are many who do not, yet who could feel equally certain that their beliefs are true. One of the most significant aspects of the view presented here is that the source of one’s contingent beliefs is, in large part, one’s physiology.

The social world is a critical component of enactive cognition because our social interactions are part of the external environment that, when structurally coupled with the structures of our body, help to create or bring forth a world. In a sense, according to enactive cognition, Butler has figured out half of the puzzle with her emphasis on the social conditions. Her focus on the relevance of one’s history of interactions within the social environment is also similar to enactive cognition. History according to the enactive approach, however, is more complicated because it also refers to the history of changes within the mind and body that produce one’s experience. To give an account of oneself would entail not only an explanation of the social conditions, but also how one was affected by the structural changes of one’s mind and body. Social norms and expectations

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Maturana and Varela, TK: 245.
\item Maturana and Varela, TK: 245.
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that form part of one’s subjectivity would function differently depending on the regularities that arise from the structures of one’s sensorimotor system that have been formed throughout one’s history. From these changes emerges a unique reality or world that structures who a person is. Recognition would not only involve recognizing others as individuals, but recognizing the reality or world to which their history, including the history of physical changes, has led.

A great deal of uncertainty emerges due to the inability to give an account of oneself and especially because it is not clear what the use of giving an account of oneself would be if the values one is using to base an expectation of such an account are also uncertain and contingent. Awareness of this uncertainty helps make more visible the opportunity to consider what one’s values are through reflection and openness to a wide variety of religious and philosophical traditions. Although one may be able to better fashion values according to one’s beliefs and feelings, it seems possible that values would not necessarily stray far from values already in existence because religious and philosophical traditions from all over the world and in different eras share much with each other.\textsuperscript{32} Research in evolutionary psychology also suggests that it is possible that some of one’s views of ethics and morality are influenced by evolution thus helping to explain similarities in beliefs.\textsuperscript{33} However, because of the uncertainty that would still exist, it would likely be useful for one to be clear and explicit about one’s views and how one arrived at them, as much as the could, to prevent confusion and misunderstanding. Even though giving an account of oneself would only be a partial account it could help

\textsuperscript{32} Ruse: 263-4.
\textsuperscript{33} Ruse: 226, 228, 231.
one to be better understood and increase the possibility for people to be inclined to work with others.

Enactive cognition helps to explain how values, beliefs, and practices that pertain to ethics emerge, but considering a sociological and anthropological analysis could provide a more complete picture of how these beliefs and practices are formed and function within society. Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus*, practical sense, and practice can be seen to have much in common with those scientific theories, and between them they provide a robust orientation for situating ethical theory. Like Varela et al., Bourdieu challenges the idea that perception of the world can be understood as representing the world as it is.\(^{34}\) He argues, instead, that “objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and…the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the *habitus*, which is constituted in practice.”\(^{35}\) The internal features of such a system are concrete physical structures that are responsible for the continuous structuring and restructuring of the system. These physical structures would involve neurons and other anatomical parts of the human central nervous system that are changed and altered as is the case in the development of “muscle memory” and habitual ways of thinking and behaving. Some physical structures are present at birth, while others develop through one’s interactions with others, hence the relevance of sociological analysis. These dispositions are described by Bourdieu as “the internalization of externality.”\(^{36}\) This internalization could be seen as a manifestation of structural coupling, in which two systems become congruent after a history of

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\(^{35}\) Bourdieu: 52.

\(^{36}\) Bourdieu: 55.
interactions. Bourdieu emphasizes that the *habitus* is “a product of history.” This emphasis is similar to the theory of enactive cognition, which argues that cognition is “the history of structural coupling that brings forth a world.” The *habitus* is also said to act as “a system of cognitive and motivating structures.” *Habitus*, then, might describe a collection of interrelated subnetworks that produce a person’s dispositions.

Similar to enactive cognition’s contention that the world a person perceives is dependent upon the structures of the perceiver, Bourdieu says external forces manifest themselves “in accordance with the specific logic of the organism in which they are incorporated.” The types of dispositions that develop depend on the body of the person for their particular form and content, and also are exercised through those bodily structures. For Bourdieu’s sociological and anthropological theory, how humans develop and function must be understood as an embodied experience. It is not enough to observe the actions of individuals or to presume that a person’s relevant cognitive life is only made up of its rational and intentional features. Instead, he includes the ways in which, through the body, habitual action makes and shapes human experience and perception. Living in society produces tangible physical changes within one’s body and mind that, according to Bourdieu, Varela et al., and Maturana, are of central importance in social theory and social science research.

The relevance of these physical structures can be seen in how some beliefs function. For example, Bourdieu describes how anthropologists have attempted to “live” the beliefs of certain cultures that are very different than their own. No matter how hard

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37 Maturana and Varela, TK: 74.
38 Bourdieu: 54.
39 Bourdieu: 55, 53.
40 Bourdieu: 55.
they tried to have the same subjective experience of belief, such as those involving mythologies and beliefs in supernatural powers, the researchers could not really enter into this other world and experience those beliefs as real beliefs.\footnote{Bourdieu: 68.} For those who grew up in the researched culture, in similar “conditions of existence,” beliefs in witchcraft or animism, for example, were entirely “sensible” to the point of being “common-sense.”\footnote{Bourdieu: 65-8, 58.} Likewise the beliefs of the researcher cannot be fully believed by those who did not grow up in the same conditions. These beliefs are related to what Bourdieu calls “practical sense.”\footnote{Bourdieu: 67.} He describes this concept as being similar to having a “feel for the game” in sports, where a person has the ability to engage in the game with ease and without deliberating about a specific action because the logic of the game has been internalized.\footnote{Bourdieu: 66-7.} Participants recognize that sports are arbitrary and artificial social constructs, but in the case of the social field in which one is born and lives, this arbitrariness and artificiality often goes unnoticed.\footnote{Bourdieu: 67.} As in the case of enactive cognition, mental structures create a world that is marked by regularities that seem real and normal. The cognitive structures that are produced, the \textit{habitus}, operate in the social field according to the “present of the presumed world, the only one it could ever know.”\footnote{Bourdieu: 64.} Like Varela et al. and Maturana, Bourdieu describes each person’s subjective experience (created through an interaction with the external world) to constitute a “world,” one that can only be experienced by the person who inhabits that world and which is not a reflection of the world as it is, but rather a world that manifests itself only through the very structures that create one’s own
subjective experience. Our beliefs would not reflect “the” world, but instead refer to “a” world, our particular world.

These different worlds are different partially because the “conditions of existence” produce different beliefs, according to Bourdieu. One of the reasons that beliefs operate in such a powerful way, according to Bourdieu, is that they are not just products of intentional, rational thought developed through discourse, but because they develop through and result in bodily changes. These beliefs, he argues, are not a “state of mind,” but rather a “state of the body.” The beliefs develop in individuals not because of an adherence to certain rules, but because the body acts as “a living memory pad…and a repository for the most precious values.” Enactive cognition would not describe the construction of those beliefs and values in such a passive way, since according to the theory a person’s reality is brought forth through an interaction between the structures of the mind/body and the external environment. The results, however, remain similar since in both cases durable structures are created that cannot be understood as following certain rules or developing from rational engagement, but instead are due to changes in the body. Bourdieu also says that “[w]hat is ‘learned by the body’ is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is.” This position would also follow from enactive cognition because the structural changes in our physical makeup are what constitute us.

How one acts and what one believes are inseparable from one’s body. It is those changes in one’s body that produce who one is. Changing what one believes is not

48 Bourdieu: 68.
49 Bourdieu: 68.
50 Bourdieu: 73.
necessarily a matter of “changing one’s mind,” but would also be a matter of changing the physical structures of one’s body. As was seen in the example of the anthropologists trying to believe as their research subjects believed, certain changes in belief were not possible because the physical changes required for such a change were not possible. However, the more similar one culture is to another, the easier it would be for a person to change his or her beliefs.\textsuperscript{51} Although there may be more similarities among those who are from a similar class or culture, one’s specific history; his or her particular family, neighborhood, friends, etc., even among those who share many of the same cultures attitudes and beliefs, have a unique background that produces different possibilities.\textsuperscript{52} Beliefs and values, such as those pertaining to contemporary issues, such as abortion or capital punishment would also function in a similar way. Certain conditions of existence, including the particular beliefs and dispositions of those in one’s surroundings would be imprinted in the body through structural coupling. These belief and values emerge from physical changes in the sensorimotor system that are often difficult to change because of their habit-like nature.

Even changes that occur quickly, seemingly without the gradual development of physical structures through structural coupling or development of \textit{habitus}, such as in the case of religious conversion would still be caused and affected by these processes. Although the changes in physical structure due to structural coupling may not have manifested directly, they would form part of the structuring dispositions that make viable the possibility of conversion. A specific event may trigger a reaction that effects the various interconnected subnetworks in a way that feels as if it “came out of nowhere,”

\textsuperscript{51} Bourdieu: 68.
\textsuperscript{52} Bourdieu: 58.
such as can be the case in the experience of coming up with a creative new product or idea. Religious conversion between religions that are more similar, such Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, would be more common as opposed to conversions between Christianity and aboriginal animism or Shintoism, for example.

This consideration of human biology is not suggesting that human biology differs in a politically significant way between different cultural or ethic groups. Instead, what I am attempting to highlight is the relevance of human biology when thinking about politics. The differences that arise from sociological variables affect a variety of politically relevant factors, including criminality, educational attainment, gender roles, and racist attitudes, and depend on and emerge through our biological structures. These various politically relevant factors would be seen as materializing from these habits, beliefs, and values, which are manifestations of changes in our biological structures. If political actors are interested in addressing these factors, understanding the root causes, attempting to address the root causes, or at least using this understanding to contextualize and construct a more complex and thorough analysis, then seriously considering the relevance of biology may be more effective.

In addition to beliefs, expressly physical functions, such as how one’s body moves, how one sits, and how one talks to others, are practices that also form part of one’s world, according to Bourdieu.\textsuperscript{53} These practices we engage in, many of which we are not enacting consciously, make up much of the behavior that might be labeled by some as either moral or immoral, or ethical or unethical. In \textit{Ethical Know-How}, Varela emphasizes the relevance of our embodied actions and practices for ethical discourse. He argues that most of what one does that could be called ethical or moral actually occurs

\textsuperscript{53} Bourdieu: 69.
through these types of day-to-day largely habitual practices, rather than through rational judgment.\textsuperscript{54} His argument is largely rooted in the theory of enactive cognition. Varela insists that much of our behavior that one could describe as ethical or moral could be described as a type of expertise. As one interacts with one’s surrounding, one gains a certain type of expertise, such as being able to use utensils, have a conversation, or respond to the needs of others.\textsuperscript{55} Varela describes these abilities as types of skilled behavior and refers to them as “microworlds” and “microidentities.”\textsuperscript{56} In each moment one is responding to the immediate situation, which Varela calls “spontaneous coping.”\textsuperscript{57} One is able to effectively respond to the immediate situation by enacting a microworld.\textsuperscript{58} Behavior that is often considered to be ethical or moral, such as whether one does unto others as one would have done unto oneself, or whether one respects the dignity of each individual, as Kant’s moral theory insists, would oftentimes occur spontaneously and without deliberation by enacting one of those largely habitual microworlds.

Intentionality in terms of one’s actions and practices is of less importance for Bourdieu and Varela than for other thinkers. Bourdieu contends that one’s \textit{habitus}, which makes one’s particular actions or practices possible, “can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor.”\textsuperscript{59} In other words, a being need not be consciously active to coordinate the dispositions that underlie beliefs and actions. The enactive approach to cognition provides insight as to why a rational actor would not be necessary for many human actions. Recalling the research on sight

\textsuperscript{54} Varela: 3-5, 23.
\textsuperscript{55} Varela: 9.
\textsuperscript{56} Varela: 23, 17.
\textsuperscript{57} Varela: 6, 17.
\textsuperscript{58} Varela: 17.
\textsuperscript{59} Bourdieu: 55.
described above, the theory of enactive cognition argues that the mind is composed of different interrelated subnetworks that act without any identifiable hierarchy and with some anatomical and functional independence.\textsuperscript{60} For example, one’s bodily structures work together without one’s awareness to provide a coherent visual experience. In enactivism, cognitive structures pertaining to belief, action, and so on operate similarly to other mental structures, such as vision, which do not always need intentional actions to function.

Butler’s view of ethics shares much with this analysis of embodiment; however, there are a few significant differences. Her insistence on the relevance of the social for ethics would be corroborated by this approach because as an embodied self one is always linked to the social, including in regards to the ways one’s internal structures have been formed, since their formation occurred largely through one’s interactions with others. She also acknowledges that certain possibilities for action might be closed off due to one’s history when she says that “[n]ot every condition of the subject is open to revision, since the conditions of formation are not always recuperable and knowable.”\textsuperscript{61} Butler also stresses that the capacity for change is a relevant component of ethics, which would be supported by the theory of enactive cognition and \textit{habitus}.\textsuperscript{62} One key difference, however, is that she describes the possibility for ethics and ethical conduct as arising from one’s critical capacities for self-reflection.\textsuperscript{63} While this embodied perspective also emphasizes the relevance of self-reflection, it also highlights the role that nonrational or nonintentional actions and beliefs play in the creation of our values, discussions of ethics,

\textsuperscript{60} Varela, Thompson, and Rosch: 162.
\textsuperscript{61} Butler: 134.
\textsuperscript{62} Butler: 49.
\textsuperscript{63} Butler: 49.
and the execution of actions, including those that might be deemed to be “ethical conduct.”

Before moving on to what I see to be some of the most relevant implications of these approaches that emphasize the embodiment nature of human experience for ethics and politics, I will summarize the most salient points of these theories. One’s perception of the world is ultimately dependent on these structures of internal components. Through one’s interactions with the external world, one’s internal structures change and result in a congruence with these external features. These transformations are physical changes in the body that shape and limit one’s possible perceptions, beliefs, and actions. Like other habits, these attributes take time to create or change and often arise in a nonrational and nonintentional way. One’s perception about the world, including one’s values and beliefs, emerge from one’s history of interactions and create a coherent reality or world for each person. This reality or world feels as if it is filled with certainties and truths, but actually only reflects one’s subjective and contingent particular world, not the world as it is, since it is our unique internal structures that make our perception possible. Thus each person inhabits a particular world or reality and our perceptions only ever reflect a world and not the world.

At the end of *The Tree of Knowledge*, Maturana and Varela discuss ethics and conclude that if we want to coexist with another “we must see that his [sic] certainty – however undesirable it may seem to us – is as legitimate and valid as our own because, like our own, that certainty expresses his [sic] conservation of structural coupling in a domain of existence.”

To live with others and as a result bring forth a world where

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64 Maturana and Varela, TK: 245-6.
features are shared, they argue, neither person can assert that he or she is “certain.”

I argue that, although not explicitly stated by Maturana and Varela, a conclusion implied when viewing human experience in this embodied way is that ethics, thought of as a discipline that identifies certainties about how one ought to act and about what is good or bad and right or wrong would be in question as coherent and viable approach. Emphasis on making judgments about someone or something as good or bad and right or wrong would also be questionable because it would be an act of asserting a “certainty” in one’s world and denying the realities of others.

Even asserting that killing is wrong or that one ought not kill would be a contradiction and an impossibility from this view of embodied ethics. Someone who asserts such a position would only be able to attempt to justify it by referring to various reasons that are only coherent from within the reality of that person or people who share certain features of it. Those reasons may be incomprehensible and unsatisfactory for someone whose reality is quite different. For such a person, it is quite possible that no amount of rational dialogue would compel them to change their position, at least with their current embodied values and beliefs. In that case, one person’s world is, at least temporarily, irreconcilable with someone else’s world. One sees this not only between different cultures and countries, but also within a particular country or culture. Positions on issues such as abortion, social welfare spending, and capital punishment are at times irreconcilable, with all sides claiming that their perspective is correct. Yet each perspective is equally compelling for the individuals who live in that perspective. If one person asserts that something is wrong or that someone should do a specific thing, that person would be asserting that his or her world is the real world and all others are false.

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65 Maturana and Varela, TK: 246.
when according to this theory of embodiment each world is equally real to those who experience it. Traditional ethics often describes itself as the discipline that discusses what one “ought” to do or what is the “right” thing to do. Ethicists who assert and argue that someone should do x is assuming that the logic of their reality or world is more real than another’s and that they are superior to these others because they “know” that their world is the correct world and all others are false or inferior. Such claims and arguments are conducive to antagonism and are the end of ethical dialogue. They close off debate because they close off another person’s world.

Embodied ethics would not start by assuming that the reality created by one’s own embodied experience is somehow more real, but instead would begin with the idea that each person’s reality is equally as real and that thoughts and behaviors related to ethics do not arise only from the “mind,” such as through rational dialogue, but are also a profoundly physical phenomenon. Embodied ethics would begin by fully acknowledging that one’s perspective or reality is radically contingent on one’s own history, biology, culture, etc., and that everyone inhabits an at least slightly different reality. Any certainties that one feels are also radically contingent. Had a person’s history been different one’s ethical views would most likely be different, but equally compelling. Embodied ethics would also begin with the understanding that this history has produced physical changes in the body that both make possible and limit a person’s ability to think and act, but that this capacity is not static; that is, change is always occurring and is always possible.

This version of embodied ethics would not be a form of moral relativism or ethical subjectivism because those orientations assert that the values, beliefs, and
behaviors of people represent some kind of truth, even if it is only for those who hold it. Considering one’s own or someone else’s views as true is incompatible with embodied ethics because such a position could imply that other people’s views or reality are false when embodied ethics suggests that each reality or world is equally compelling. These orientations are also incompatible with embodied ethics because this ethical perspective contends that considering one’s own or someone else’s values, beliefs, and behaviors as true is to not recognize the contingency of those thoughts and actions, since they are always changing and highly mutable. In terms of formal moral theory, embodied ethics would have to fall under the category of moral nihilism, because from this perspective there is no justification for claiming that x is good, bad, right, or wrong, or that someone ought to or is obligated to do x, because there is not a way to justify that a specific reality or world is more real than another. From this ethical view there is no way to say that something is inherently wrong or right or that someone should do something because our perspectives are contingent on the history of evolution of our species and any given value or practice is contingent on specific histories, cultures, and so on.

This moral nihilism would likely seem to many to be problematic, both in practice and in terms of theory. Some might fear that it would lead to a breakdown of human community if taken seriously, or that there would be no ethical basis for politics. Others might say that, even if this perspective were accepted, that at the very least we would have to assert “oughts” and label certain behavior as wrong or bad, even if we believed that such actions were ultimately not justifiable, in order to salvage ethics and humanity. However, in the following chapter I will attempt to sketch out how accepting the implications of embodied experience, including an inability to assert “oughts” or to label
behavior or people as good or bad, or right or wrong, need not lead, in practice or in theory, to those feared consequences. I will attempt to achieve this objective by exploring an approach to ethics that emerges not in spite of moral nihilism, not to spite moral nihilism, but instead through and because of moral nihilism. Phrased in another way, the following attempts to find a means of radically accepting the ways in which people are inevitably and irreconcilably different, which would preclude traditional ethical notions of good, bad, right, wrong, ought, and judgment based on those concepts, while still providing a theoretical and practical foundation for building human communities and relationships.

Some might challenge the ethical perspective proposed in the following chapter by arguing that in the end what is put forth is a “veiled ought” or just another “should;” that basically what this thesis amounts to is the idea that “one ought not to use the word ‘ought.’” These allegations, however, would be a misreading. The ethical ideas contained in this thesis are just one approach to ethics among many. What is presented here is only an act of sharing my “world” with others. Even though I might believe that the approach suggested is a useful one, that I like it, or that it just somehow feels true to me, I am in no way suggesting that others ought to believe these ideas. The primary expectation I have for others is that perhaps, through this sharing, there might be others who might come to share pieces of my world or who might be prompted to share with me so that I could better understand their world, even if we end up disagreeing. This sharing can take a variety of forms, including attempting to provide persuasive arguments, modeling what we believe through our actions, trying to better understand each other’s views, and discussing our assumptions.
Another potential problem that some might see with the ethical orientation presented in this thesis is that if ethics does not make judgments about what is right or wrong or what one ought to, how can we talk about different ethical issues and dilemmas? These types of discussions about ethics have a place in embodied ethics, but rather than in their usual form of thinking about conclusions as what one ought to do, these discussions open up ethical possibilities. Instead of making arguments about what one should do, these arguments would refer to what one could do. Michel Foucault describes that what the intellectual does is “to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions.” According to Foucault, this knowledge does not give the intellectual the right to “tell others what they must do,” but rather the intellectual’s role is “to participate in the formation of a political will (where he has his role as a citizen to play).” The intellectual does not impose his or her knowledge on others in the form of what one ought to do, but instead works with others to create a shared world, in his case through a shared political will. This thesis specifically addresses ethics, but shares Foucault’s sentiment about the relationship between theory and practice. Instead of affirming supposed certainties about how one ought to act, ethical discourse can help challenge the assumptions and habits that seem so certain and to provide alternate possibilities for thinking and acting; but these possibilities only ever gain force when others are brought into the discussion or bring themselves in by reading and acting.

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67 Foucault: 305-6
Chapter 3

Ethics and Politics in Practice

This chapter focuses on violence because not only is it a major issue for democratic societies in terms of state action, it is an action that makes most people quite uncomfortable and is considered by most ethical and moral theories to be wrong (except in specific circumstances). The theory presented in this paper would be severely damaged if it could not address the issue of violence in a meaningful way. To begin this consideration of violence, I will return to Butler’s discussion of some of the limitations of using judgment as the sole or primary tool of ethics and also explores its relationship to violence. She argues that judgment through condemnation, for example, “becomes the way in which we establish the other as unrecognizable,” because it is during condemnation that the commonalities that exist between judge and judged are set aside.68 These unrecognizable others may often be subjected to violence and at the extreme, put to death, in the name of ethics.69 Without recognition our very existence is in peril.70 It is by declaring others to be guilty of a wrong, or conveying complete disapproval of someone, that violence can be condoned, and thus this type of judgment is, in

68 Butler: 46.
69 Butler: 46.
70 Butler: 49.
effect, what makes such violence possible. I would further argue that this formulation suggests that if it is believed that what makes ethics possible is this type of judgment, as is suggested by ethical theories that distinguish themselves as the discipline that addresses what is right or wrong, good or bad, and what one ought to do, then what distinguishes ethics from other disciplines is its capacity for justifying violence.

In this chapter I will try to show how perhaps ethics is not the most suitable location for situating the capacity for violence by arguing that judgments that bear the capacity for violence are better isolated as part of the political or social. Ethics, in contrast, could be the realm where we could consider the conduct of others in an open and accepting way. While Butler argues that ethical relations cannot be reduced to judgment, she affirms that she is “certainly not arguing that we ought never to make judgments – they are urgently necessary for political, legal, and personal life alike”. The purpose and function of judgment in each of these spheres, and also in ethics, are quite different and are perhaps glossed over too quickly by Butler.

Nietzsche’s distinction between good and bad and good and evil is an example of how certain types of ethical judgment and violence are interconnected. Nietzsche makes a sharp distinction between calling something “bad” as compared to labeling something “evil.” His stories about the development of the slave and noble moralities help to explain the difference, and also provide other useful concepts for analyzing ethics that will be addressed in the following pages. The noble classes, according to Nietzsche, develop their sense of what is “good” based on the qualities that they themselves possess and

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71 Butler: 45.
72 The use of “good and evil” in the title of the thesis is not specifically a reference to Nietzsche’s understanding of good and evil. Instead “good and evil” is a general reference to moral claims, and in which, “bad” is subsumed under the category of “evil.”
think of the lower classes as “bad” due to this other class’s perceived inferiority, but the 
lower classes are not an object of hatred. The lower classes, due to their impotence in 
the face of the domination of the more powerful noble classes, are filled with a burning 
resentment for the noble classes and proceed to view them as evil and as objects of 
hatred, turning those they consider evil into monsters. In the allegory of the lambs and 
birds of prey, the lambs are being eaten by the birds of prey and Nietzsche says “that the 
lambs dislike the birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no ground for 
reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off the little lambs.” However, the lambs 
react by saying amongst themselves “these birds of prey are evil” and the birds of prey 
become objects of hatred. The emotions people feel when they hate someone or think 
that someone is evil as opposed to solely bad and disliked would likely be much 
stronger. If one condemns another as evil, the severity of violence used against this other person 
might be greater than if that other was considered solely bad, because it could be viewed 
that those who are deemed to be evil justify harsher treatment.

In *Violence and Democracy*, John Keane acknowledges, to a certain extent, this 
risk that emerges with the concept of evil, which is particularly troubling for democracy 
because he argues that violence is “antithetical” to democracy. Not only is there an 
aversion and avoidance of violence in practice, there is also a theoretical basis for non-
vioence in democracies. Despite this non-violent ideal, democracies often find 
themselves using violence within their borders and against those outside them. In 

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74 Nietzsche, 470-3.
75 Nietzsche: 480.
76 Nietzsche: 480.
77 Keane: 1.
78 Keane: 1.
beginning his discussion about the means that could be used by democratic societies to reduce violence, he quotes Nietzsche: “Whoever fights monsters, should see to it that in the process they do not become a monster” because one of the main ways democracies use physical force is against those who use violence.\textsuperscript{79} One of his guidelines for reducing violence is for people to “exercise caution and heap doubt upon schemes” that “call for the harshest possible remedies…against those whose violence is often dismissed as ‘evil.’”\textsuperscript{80} Keane appears to be addressing Nietzsche’s concerns about considering others to be evil, since pausing and reflecting more carefully about the use of violence against those who are considered evil may reduce the use of violence, if it is the case that one is inclined to use and justify violence against those who are considered to be evil. I would argue, however, that a more radical step than Keane’s would be necessary for reducing violence and excessive exclusion in a democracy: namely, reducing the use of the concept of evil all together. Exercising caution when possibly using violence against those who are considered to be evil may not be enough if ultimately those people are viewed as evil and as a result worthy of great violence.

However, extrapolating from the above description of Nietzsche and Keane’s thought, even considering something or someone to be bad will likely elicit more negative treatment, including exclusion and violence, than if he or she were considered in a more neutral way. Refusing to categorize people or actions as bad or evil, even people or things that are typically considered to be bad or evil, could provide a stronger foundation for ethics. Even labeling something as “wrong,” could serve to enhance exclusion. If someone or something is labeled as “wrong” and this judgment is used as

\textsuperscript{79} Keane: 165.
\textsuperscript{80} Keane: 172.
the ethical or moral foundation behind a person’s political decision, the person making the assessment would be more likely to exclude that difference or possibly engage in violence.

These labels could be a part of what Butler refers to as judgments that “summarize another’s life” but do not really address ethical concerns. This propensity for summarization that emerges from the use of terms such as good and bad does little for ethical discourse because it often acts to obscure complex issues by providing an encompassing judgment before people even have a chance to consider the circumstances or actually engage in any kind of thoughtful evaluation. If such labels were not used, people would not suddenly become disoriented in terms of their relations with others and perhaps begin to wantonly act violently with others because the effects of violence, such as emotional reactions, would remain. In the case of Nietzsche’s lambs, they would still feel the pain of losing their companions, but instead of judging the birds of prey as evil, bad, or wrong, they could instead begin to understand the birds’ reality and world, as well as their own, and with this type of evaluation begin to address the situation. This way, the lambs or lamb equivalents would likely engage in less violence themselves since they have not appointed themselves as condemners with the capacity of justifying who merits violence. However, they would retain the capacity to feel, reflect, and act. Furthermore, the behavior of the birds of prey does not change and become more “good” when they are referred to as evil or bad. If their behavior is to be meaningfully addressed it would not be through “ethical” judgments involving labeling others as bad, evil, or wrong.

Thinking of ethics in terms of how one should or ought to act is also in question if we are conceived of as embodied subjects. Making a judgment about how one should or

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81 Butler: 44.
ought to act does not acknowledge the ways in which people are limited by their mental structures, which are concrete physical features. When individuals have a physical condition, such as an inability to use one of their legs, one typically does not expect them to be able to walk on it or judge them negatively for not being able to. Other behaviors and abilities, such as those pertaining to ethics, operate more similarly to a broken leg than is often acknowledged. The analogy of the lambs of birds and prey addresses this point to a certain extent. If the lambs say that the birds of prey ought to act in a certain way, the lambs are ignoring the ways in which the birds of prey do not actually have the opportunity for alternative behavior. According to the birds’ history, both evolutionarily and up through the present moment, the lambs are their only possible food source, leaving them with no recourse but to eat the lambs. Using words such as ought or bad is not useful in this situation and can also be detrimental for the lambs, inasmuch as the lambs are inhibited from engaging in other types of behavior that might protect them. For example, from the perspective of embodied ethics, the lambs could strive to understand the world of the birds and to figure out how the external situation contributes to the birds’ behavior. The lambs, metaphorically speaking, could recognize that they are being eaten because the birds need to eat and the lambs could try to alter the external circumstances by providing alternative food sources for the birds. This action does more to create a situation that is traditionally ethical or moral than saying the birds should not eat the lambs or are bad because they eat innocent lambs.

The story of the lambs and birds of prey is not a perfect analogy for human relations because humans have a capacity for rationality. Birds of prey are evolutionarily programmed to engage in those behaviors, while humans have the capacity to use their
rationality and choose to behave in other ways. However, expecting that a person ought to act in a certain way because we believe them to be rational actors capable of choosing to act in such a way ignores the idea that human thought and behavior does not arise in solely or even primarily rational and intentional ways and is limited by our history. It could be that a person, in a specific moment, may be physically unable to act in the way we expect that he or she should, just as the anthropologists were not able to engage in the action of believing as their objects of study believed. In embodied ethics, one could attempt to meet the others where they actually are, rather than where one wants them to be by asserting that they ought to act a certain way.

Nietzsche’s story about the creation of the concept of “evil” is also useful for considering how to interact with others. The lower classes view the noble classes as evil and objects of hatred because of their impotence in the face of their oppressors. Giving another person or group power in a situation may reduce their hateful feelings and potential for violent action against others. Telling someone that he or she is wrong, evil, or bad puts someone in a weak and defensive position, increasing the possibility that he or she will lash out or be unsympathetic to one’s perspective. Giving someone options or asking whether he or she would be able to do a particular action might be more effective. Showing that one is understanding of the views of the other person could also help. Explaining how the specific action would benefit the other person is another strategy.

There are also some cases where an individual has rationally decided that he or she wants to adopt a specific type of behavior; that, for example, instead of solving problems with verbal or physical aggression, he or she wants to act in a nonviolent way. However, this person may continue to react with violence even though he or she has
rationally decided to avoid such behavior. Embodied ethics would explain that this situation might be emerging because the habitual forms of responding that are rooted in the bodily structures of the mind and body are such that the person is physically unable to respond in the way that he or she rationally would like to. Rather than judging this person as a bad person or a person with bad actions, the embodied ethics perspective would acknowledge the person’s situation as a physical development in his or her body, and that perhaps he or she is also limited by an external environment that reinforces or helps perpetuate such behavior. In addition, one could also help this person to develop into the type of person he or she wants to become by helping him or her to develop new habits or helping to change the external conditions. Without engaging in a discussion of what one ought to do, labeling actions as bad or wrong, or enforcing one’s views on another, a person subscribing to this form of embodied ethics would be able to make concrete actions.

In the case of someone who does act with violence and who does not want to act differently, embodied ethics would still refrain from using the language of should or bad or wrong for either the actions or the person. It might be argued that saying that the actions are bad would be the correct position, but not that the person is bad; however, from the perspective of embodied ethics, habitual behavior is in many ways who we are. Most of our interactions in the world are those moments of spontaneous coping which are very habit-like reactions, and which are inseparable from who we are. To say that someone’s actions are bad is, in a very real sense, saying that he or she is bad. This relationship between the action and the person engaging in the action could also be related to Nietzsche’s assertion that “there is not ‘being’ behind doing, effecting,
becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.” In enactive cognition, the perception of a separate “self” arises through recurrent patterns of actions within the interconnected subnetworks of the mind that create an illusory phenomenological experience of a separate identity perceived of as a “doer.” Bourdieu’s idea of dispositions being directed without a conductor, coupled with his idea that what is learned by the body is not knowledge that one has, but rather is a part of who one is, would suggest that actions are inseparable from the person.

In addition, if it is the case that each person’s behavior seems sensible and commonsensical in their reality or world, to say that another person is bad or wrong is to deny his or her world as a real world, even though each person’s world is equally real because it is the world they live in and which is produced by the physical structures of each person. Someone sympathizing with the embodied ethics approach would not say that the other person is bad or their actions are bad or even that the other person should not act that way, but instead one could say that one does not want those actions to be part of the world that he or she wants to live in and one could explain why.

In order to construct a world that one wants to live, it would likely be necessary to share that world with other people, which would require building a world with those other people. Building a world with another person without imposing one’s world on another can be approached in numerous ways. Because one’s world is so seemingly commonsensical to oneself, it might be difficult for people to imagine any other possible world. Sometimes introducing the idea of a viable alternative for behavior is enough to make a person want to act in a different way and share the same world. One could also

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82 Nietzsche: 481.
83 Bourdieu: 59, 73.
share to the best of one’s ability how one perceives the world or discuss similarities and differences and come to some kind of agreement. If there is an agreement, one could also, for example, model the mutually desired behavior and the other person may internalize the behavior. A person could also help the other person develop new habits or could help to change the external conditions. Although human beings have durable, physical structure, they are also in a state of continuous change and are always able to change in many ways, even if not in all possible ways. This view of ethics and these ethical possibilities both theoretically and in practice acknowledge the limitations people face, but also recognize their possibility for change.

Although it might seem that this theory leaves each of us exceptionally vulnerable if we cannot tell others that they, for example, should not cause us harm, the theory in practice is not so different than that of other ethical theories. The articulation of a “should” does little to prevent someone from hurting another person if the other person believes that he or she should in fact inflict harm. The alternate methods of interacting with people proposed by this theory would essentially be as effective and possibly more successful at preventing others from causing harm if it helps others to develop values, beliefs, and habits that involve not harming others.

In extreme circumstances, it might be the case that in order to construct that world one wants to live in, one would have to exclude this these other people or particular actions from one’s life, which would be effective at restructuring the situation. This exclusion would not occur in the realm of ethics according to embodied ethics, because this person’s ethical view is that the other person’s differences are acceptable, but instead this action would take place in the social realm. Our ethical views help to shape our
social actions, just as social actions help to shape our ethical views, but they remain distinct. One’s personal ethical views are part of one’s constantly transforming and self-generating structures, even if this transformation takes place within a social environment and helps shape the environment. Embodied ethics would still be relevant in this situation because any time there is a direct or indirect contact with people who are excluded, one could be understanding of their changing limitations and possibilities and also consider how they might be able to be included to a greater degree.

It might be feared that this conception of embodied ethics would not in fact aid democracy if people began to cling more closely to their own specific morals and beliefs and excluding others that they did not wish to accept. However, the primary assumption of embodied ethics is not segregating those who do not conform to one’s own views. On the contrary, the initial impulse of embodied ethics is instead the renunciation of the certainty of one’s owns views on ethics as more real than those of others. In this state of equal worth, the inevitably diverse beliefs of individuals can more easily be accepted and positive actions can be taken toward democratic ideals. These positive actions would not consist of pushing one’s own values or personal collection of “what one ought to do,” but rather in understanding others’ embodied histories and the worlds they produces and then with this knowledge trying to build a world together by searching for what is common. This method of interacting with others most easily lends itself to interpersonal relations in private life or civil society, but the same principles could be used to a large extent between institutions and among political leaders negotiating power and policies.

As in our interpersonal social lives, political systems can have tendencies to exclude certain groups and individuals or can have mechanisms for including these
others, such as in the case of democratic politics. In democratic theory, equality is often a key term that helps to explain and justify inclusionary politics. Considering the relationship between politics, equality, and ethics can help to explain how this approach to ethics is not destructive for politics. To explore this relationship, I will refer to a dialogue between Butler and Ernesto Laclau, carried out through letters in which they discuss the meaning and use of equality in radical democratic theory and the function of exclusion within political and social space.

Both agree that political communities and societies must have certain exclusions for them to be viable arrangements for those living within them.\textsuperscript{84} A state of “total equality” would be impossible because some people or things would not be able to be included.\textsuperscript{85} Butler describes this concept of required exclusion as the “inadmissibility of certain ‘differences.’”\textsuperscript{86} According to Laclau, difference is implicit in the concept of equality since “[t]o say that two things are equal…presupposes that they are different from each other in some other respects (otherwise there would be no equality but identity).”\textsuperscript{87} He continues to say that within political discourse, discussing equality involves trying to “deal with differences” and expanding equality in society would necessitate first “the proliferation of differences.”\textsuperscript{88} Rather than locating equality in some form of sameness, which functions to homogenize, Laclau argues for an equality that begins by increasing and recognizing the diversity and plurality that exists in society, and involves “discovering something which is identical within the realm of differences.”\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{85} Butler and Laclau: 6.
\textsuperscript{86} Butler and Laclau: 7.
\textsuperscript{87} Butler and Laclau: 5.
\textsuperscript{88} Butler and Laclau: 5.
\textsuperscript{89} Butler and Laclau, 5.
This version of embodied ethics could be seen as implicitly promoting equality because it is based in accepting the differences between people, but also “discovers” something identical, namely, that each person’s world is equally real.

From Butler and Laclau’s perspective, even in an ever-increasing expansion of equality and inclusion, there would have to be a stopping point for what could be included in order to preserve the integrity of a particular democratic political or social space. For example, if there were no restriction on violence or killing, in other words, if this difference in regards to violence and killing was not excluded, a political community could not be sustained. A judgment must be made in politics and some differences must be excluded. In embodied ethics it is possible to accept all differences by accepting each person’s world as real, but believe that politically, certain behaviors threaten the cohesion of the polity and prevent the creation of the world a person wants to live in. Part of what explains this distinction between politics and ethics is that in politics a decision must be made, whereas in ethics it is possible to refrain from making a decision. Decision making, according to Laclau, always entails exclusion. When a decision is made, other alternatives have been rejected or excluded. However, one does not have to make a decision in the form of a judgment when thinking about other people, things, or actions. Since in ethics, such a decision would not have to be made, ethics could be a realm where it is possible to include all differences. This ethics would not threaten the stability of political communities because politics and the social would retain their ability to exclude if and when necessary.

To help illustrate the relationship between embodied ethics and politics, I will use an example involving wealthy financiers who squander other people’s lifesavings and sell

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90 Butler and Laclau: 6.
overpriced mortgages and those who lose or might lose money due to these actions and who I will refer to as “we.” Because of their embodiment each group feels equally justified in their views and actions. From traditional ethical orientations, the actions of financiers and possibly the financiers themselves would be regarded as evil or at least bad. In contrast, from the perspective of embodied ethics, the individuals and their actions would not be considered to be “bad” because it is an ungrounded assertion since it is contingent on one’s embodied history. Had we had the exact same experiences as the wealthy self-serving financiers, we quite possibly might have developed into the same type of person with the same types of actions as the financiers. Furthermore, had our mental structures been like those of the financiers, then we would have certainly developed into the same wealthy self-serving financiers. In a very real sense, the difference between them and us, and the difference between good and bad, is a few anatomical structures and an address. In this context, the word “bad” does not refer to how the world “is,” but rather to the particular world we by chance perceive.

Describing the financiers as “bad” is in many ways an ineffective approach for considering ethics. By using the word “bad” ethical dialogue is cut off because a particular value has already been championed as correct. Instead of actually engaging in ethical discourse, virtually all that has occurred is that a particular value has been asserted. The financiers are also discredited from the start, leaving little reason for them to listen to us or even engage in a discussion. By labeling their actions and beliefs as “bad” we oversimplify the complex political, economic, and social circumstances that exist in contemporary society that are shaping our views and actions as well as theirs. Instead, it would seem more accurate to say that the actions of the financiers are
inconsistent with our hopes and aspirations about the world we wish to live in, especially as citizens of a democracy. Since it is the case that most of us are not wealthy self-serving financiers, the view of the majority would be that of the “we” I have been discussing.

Before excluding the financiers or their behaviors through political actions, discussions about ethical and political concerns could take place where each side argues for their position, suggests alternative choices, and so on. In regards to embodiment we could consider whether the behavior of the financiers has, in part, biological roots. A propensity to seek power, status, and wealth would be evolutionary beneficial and some studies have revealed that there is often a high correlation between these attributes and number of offspring, for example. The financiers may also have become accustomed to living richly and feel that they deserve such a lifestyle and as a result of these embodied feelings cannot imagine giving it up. This experience is not so different than the vast majority of the middle class, or the “we,” who do not want to give up their largely cushy lifestyle that most probably believe they deserve, in order to prevent the death of millions of people who, through no fault of their own, are not able to have their basic needs met. Calling the financiers “bad” for engaging in actions that reduce our wealth, but still allow us to live relatively comfortably seems to be a difficult claim to make when our actions at the same time allow for so much more suffering and death. If in the end we decide to exclude the behaviors of the financiers, this discussion may lessen the amount of exclusion if we better understand the views, behaviors, and circumstances of the financiers. Such a discussion may also help us to realize the ways in which our actions are not so different and that perhaps helps us to choose to act in a different way.

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91 Ruse: 231.
Although the action of excluding others who damage the community is similar in current political arrangements and in the ones suggested in this thesis, the exclusion would presumably be less and the nature of that exclusion would possibly be less violent. The state could work to understand what factors in the histories and consequent physical changes of those individuals caused those actions in order. With this information the state could help to restructure the existing societal conditions to help people develop other values and behaviors that could prevent people from engaging in that kind of activity in the future. By making those types of changes, the state would be reducing its use of exclusion in the future because fewer people would be threatening democracy and the state and fewer acts of judgment would be required. When determining the severity of physical force, the state could use the minimum amount arguably perceived to be required for maintaining democracy and the state. If individuals are able to develop alternate values, habits, and general behaviors that would prevent them from engaging in one of the legally excluded behaviors, then imprisonment may not be necessary or shorter prison sentences would be equally effective in maintaining democratic principles and the state. However, caution could be taken to prevent the detrimental effects of supervision, surveillance, and enforcement of moral and social norms that forms part of “rehabilitation” such as those that Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*. Instead of traditional forms of rehabilitations prisoners could take a more active role in choosing what type of rehabilitation they would like to engage in and rehabilitation would not have to focus on the development of certain moral or social norms that are not related to a limited number of political exclusions.
The utility of this approach to ethics for political and social action can be observed by considering the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ). HCZ describes its programs as “a new way to end poverty” by supporting “each child from before birth all the way through college.”

Issues associated with poverty; such as crime, low educational attainment, and reliance on government assistance are a challenge for democracy because they strain community relationships and government resources. Some might view the individuals who commit crimes, who drop out of school, or who use welfare aid to be morally reprehensible, and some also view these people as lost causes or hopeless, since it seems that generation after generation those in families in poverty remain in poverty. The Harlem Children’s Zone, however, implicitly takes an embodied approach to ethics and political and social action. According to embodiment, behaviors and beliefs develop in the body from the time the body first starts to develop and the HCZ begins to help people not once they start school or once they get into trouble, but instead as soon as their bodies begins developing “before birth.” The HCZ also directly addresses the external conditions in which these bodies develop by working with families before the children are born, and by providing afterschool programs and assistance through college.

The HCZ did not find its moral strength or ethical virtue by judging those whose behaviors and lifestyles were deemed by some as immoral or unethical, but instead by working with “all children and families” with the purpose of helping them succeed and giving them more choices for their futures. With financial contributions and carefully monitoring of which programs work, the HCZ has been successful at achieving its

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92 “Harlem Children’s Zone” 1 Mar. 2010 <http://hcz.org>. (Henceforth abbreviated as HCZ)
93 HCZ
goals. Those who began the organization and those who participate in and succeed in the programs do not do so because they have necessarily identified what is right or wrong, but because those actions are part of the lives that they want to lead and they have the resources and the skills to succeed in their endeavors. In other words, the external circumstances, along with their embodied beliefs and practices, have given them the opportunity to construct the worlds and realities they want to live in. The HCZ’s approach is also effective at reaching political goals, such as decreasing crime and reducing welfare spending by evaluating the limits and possibilities present in the situation and in others, rather than relying on ethical judgments, and by working with others instead of imposing punishments on them.

Although many of the examples used in this thesis refer to what might be considered not expressly political institutions, embodied ethics is also relevant at politics at the level of the state. For example, the approach of the HCZ program has been largely adopted by the Obama administration and Congress in a federal program aimed at reducing poverty. Other programs could be created and expanded and traditional criminal sentences and policies could also be rethought. In addition, laws that do not actually pose serious threats to democracy or political stability could also be removed, such as those based on religious values rather than political ones. Relevant examples include those involving alcohol sales on Sundays, certain drug laws, gay marriage, and so forth. Religious freedom and equality could also be expanded legislatively if all religious or nonreligious value systems are more equally respected. Rather than prohibiting certain

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94 HCZ
behaviors that do not substantially threaten democracy, actions could be taken to bring those individuals and their families into the mainstream political culture through culturally-sensitive opportunities for participation and social achievement that will help to cultivate democratic political values in a more democratic way.

Retribution would also not be a justifiable use of state power because punishment would serve to maintain the principles and stability of the state rather than punish the crime or person. If incarceration is used to prevent murderers from killing again rather than retribution, the conditions of the prison need not necessarily include, as Foucault describes, physical punishment, such as food rationing and corporal punishment.96 Inmates could also be treated with kindness and respect if it does not threaten the stability of the prison and such treatment could also possibly be useful in helping inmates develop less violent behaviors. However, some amount of physical punishment could be articulated as justifiable for deterrence purposes if lack of such punishment and deterrence substantially increases the amount of killing, for example.

Although ethics and morality within the framework of embodied ethics do not possess the capacity for passing condemning judgments, the theory is not ineffective in practice. Politics is able to retain its capacity for judgment. Embodied ethics can serve to help us better uphold those values that democratic societies have chosen, such as nonviolence, tolerance of diversity, minority rights, liberty, and letting individuals participate in decision-making by providing an alternate way of thinking about the differences of others.

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Chapter 4

Conclusion

Through this thesis I have tried to show that one’s biology and embodiment have relevant and significant implications for politics and ethics because what we understand ethics and politics to be, and how ethics and politics function, cannot be understood as separate from the structures that compose our bodies and minds. I have argued that the others with whom we must live and interact are at times irrevocably different because each person’s history of interactions between his or her body and the external environment creates a unique reality or world. To make an assertion about what is right, wrong, good, bad, or what one ought to do would implicitly be contending that the values of one particular reality are more real or true than those of others, which is incompatible with recognizing the worlds of others. A claim of what is right or wrong could only ever be an affirmation of what is right or wrong in the particular world of a particular person. There may be overlap among different people because similar external conditions produce similar worlds, but worlds remain distinct and values are not held universally even in small communities or social groups.

In order to make claims about conduct that one finds problematic without disregarding the realities of others, I have suggested that one could instead say that
certain behaviors are not part of the world one wants to live in. However, to create the world that one wants, one must necessarily interact with the external circumstances, which most often includes others. This construction therefore becomes a social question, and frequently a political question. Through our social relationships we create worlds that in many ways we share with others, but it is in politics where we most explicitly work together to construct a world we want to live in.

Because of this heightened relevance of thinking about what politics could be rather than what politics is, political theory could be seen as gaining importance. One issue that becomes a more significant topic for research would be socialization because it is largely through this process that people gain their values, beliefs, and habits. Possible areas of consideration could involve those forces that are dominant in socialization, such as family, the media, socioeconomic conditions, and education. These influences play a tremendous role in structuring and limiting the ethical and political possibilities of individuals and societies. If we hope to construct the world we wish to live in, then we likely have to address the forces that shape the world we currently do live in.
References


