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Introduction: The Idea of a General Ethics

We presently lack a *General Ethics*. I capitalize this term to mark it out as the name of a field of inquiry and to distinguish it from coincidental or haphazard references to "general ethics" or "ethics in general," by which an author may well mean something much more limited.

It gets worse: we presently lack even the conception of a General Ethics—there is no such term, or equivalent to what I mean by it, in general usage. Yet we badly need such a conception, not to mention the reasoned content that would fill it out, namely, a truly *general* form of ethics, an ethics that would constitute the ethical equivalent of the physicists' long sought Holy Grail of a "Theory of Everything."

Of course, the physicists' "Theory of Everything" is not literally a theory of *everything*. For starters, such a descriptive theory is never going to answer our normative ethical questions regarding the values we should live by—it might inform our answers, but it cannot, by itself, provide these answers any more than a normative ethical theory can provide a descriptive theory of nature. (A *descriptive* theory is a theory that describes how the world—or some aspect of it—*is*; what the world is *like*. In contrast, a *normative* theory is one that prescribes the norms or standards that we *ought* to strive to meet in our behavior or way of being.) Scientific theories and ethical theories operate at different levels of concern—one descriptive (and explanatory in that context), the other normative (and explanatory in that context)—and represent intellectual and cultural manifestations of the logical gap that exists between "is" and "ought." What physicists actually mean by a "Theory of Everything" is not a theory of everything, period, but a theory that lies at the basis of all things *physical*: a unified (descriptive) theory that can satisfactorily account for the widest possible range of physical phenomena.

Physicists could therefore, perhaps more humbly, refer to their much-vaunted "Theory of Everything" as a *General Physics*. In a similarly qualified vein, what I mean by the term *General Ethics* can be thought of as a theory that lies at the basis of all things *ethical*: a unified (normative) theory that can satisfactorily account for the widest possible range of ethical concerns.

My aim in this book is to provide a General Ethics.

But first things first: so, in the next two sections of this chapter, I will first provide the background context against which we need to understand the concept of General Ethics and then explain more precisely what I mean by a General Ethics and why we need such an ethics. I will then proceed in the following chapter to provide examples of the formidable range of problems that any General Ethics must be able to address. By the end of these examples, we will see that to ask for a unified ethical approach that can satisfactorily address the full range of problems that any General Ethics must be able to address—even an ethical theory that is capable of (directly) addressing all these questions in the first place, regardless of its success in doing so—is a Big Ask. The rest of this book—from chapter 3 on—is then concerned with attempting to satisfy this Big Ask. It develops an approach to General Ethics that I refer to as the *theory of responsive cohesion*.

The Background to General Ethics

Ethics is concerned, at its core, with the values we should live by. It is not centrally concerned with "values" in some vague, wishy-washy sense, such as whether I prefer my hair long or short or whether I prefer blue to green; rather, it is centrally concerned with the values that I (and you) *should* live by, with those values that we are, for various reasons, rationally obliged to respect. This central concern of ethics is therefore referred to by philosophers as *normative ethics* because it is concerned with the norms, or standards, that we ought to meet, or at least strive to meet, in our conduct.

Since the time of the classical Greek philosophers, Western ethical thinking has essentially been concerned with what I will call *interhuman ethics*. It has focused exclusively, or at least overwhelmingly, upon humans and their relationships with each other—or, in a religious con-

text, also upon their relationship to a God in whose image they supposed themselves to have been made (which rendered God as a kind of Super-person and people as minigods). The guiding idea in the dominant Western secular and religious forms of interhuman ethics has been that the only values that we are rationally obliged to respect (in addition to those that might relate to God Himself [*sic*]) are those of respect for people (and, indeed, depending on the time and place with which we are concerned, not necessarily all people). The reasons given for the special value of (at least certain groups of) people relative to the rest of earthly creation have typically turned on the ideas that humans are uniquely rational or that humans are uniquely endowed with a soul—a special, inner aspect of themselves that could potentially join with God, the ultimate source of all goodness, when they died, and which thereby constituted living testimony to their potential goodness despite their "fallen" state.

Needless to say, the rest of the—nonrational, un-ensouled—world got pretty short shrift on the basis of these ideas. As John Passmore argues in his already classic study *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, the history of ideas reveals that these kinds of anthropocentric views have been employed, in varying forms, again and again to underpin the morally charged conclusion that humans are either exclusively or over-whelmingly valuable relative to all other earthly kinds and that these other earthly kinds are *therefore* ours to do with as we will. Indeed, as Passmore notes, throughout the history of Western philosophical thinking "It is constantly assumed that whatever else exists does so only for the sake of the rational."[1] This sort of thinking has patently obnoxious upshots. To take just one kind of example, Passmore shows that "In so far as cruelty to animals was wrong, this was only because, so it was argued by Aquinas [C13th], by Kant [C18th], and by a multitude of lesser thinkers, it might induce a callousness towards *human* suffering. There was nothing wrong with cruelty to animals *in itself*."[2] It seems almost inconceivable to us today that highly intelligent thinkers of any period could seriously maintain that nonhuman animals either were not capable of suffering (a view to which Descartes, "the father of modern philosophy," was theoretically committed) or else that they could suffer but that this suffering was of no moral consequence in itself. Yet, up until at least Kant's time, the most influential thinkers in the Western tradition thought precisely this.

As incredible as it might seem, Western ethics only really began to explore ethical questions that lay beyond the confines of interhuman ethics—or at least to do this in a concerted, ongoing fashion—as recently as the 1970s. This was when some—a very few—philosophers began to advance serious arguments for the moral status not just of humans but of all sentient beings, that is, entities that have the capacity to feel, entities that it would be *like something* to be, or, in other words, entities that could be described as *beings* as opposed to "merely" (i.e., nonsentient) *living things*. The implications of these arguments were that moral agents had various obligations in respect of all sentient beings (or, in some versions, some more specialized subset of sentient beings, but a subset that nevertheless ran well beyond humans alone). Other philosophers began to go further and develop arguments to the effect that all living things, whether sentient or not, were deserving of at least some degree of moral consideration; there were "in principle" reasons why it was wrong, say, to wantonly destroy living things such as trees. Yet other philosophers began to go further still: not only did they want to overcome what they saw as the highly anthropocentric bias of traditional Western ethics—an aim they shared with both the animal welfare and life-based approaches—but they also wanted to overcome what they saw as a wrongheaded *individualistic* focus in ethics, which applied to both the animal welfare and the standard life-based approaches just as much as it did to interhuman ethics. They wanted, in other words, to develop a *holistic* approach to ethics, specifically, an ethics that proceeded from a primary focus on complex, ecosystemic assemblages of individual living things and that endorsed the overarching value of ecological integrity.

The intellectual explosion that emerged in ethics in the last quarter of the twentieth century marked the end of the roughly two-and-a-half thousand years of essentially purely anthropocentric ethics in the Western philosophical tradition. And, as is often the way with intellectual explosions, once the stranglehold of the reigning orthodoxy had begun to be loosened, new thinkers very quickly rushed out into the "fresh air" to explore and map out the most obvious intellectual possibilities that suddenly seemed to be available—much as organisms can rapidly colonize new ecological niches following recovery from a catastrophic event. Thus, in relatively short order, the ethical landscape was mapped

out beyond its familiar anthropocentric borders to include approaches that could be described as *pathocentric* (i.e., centered on the capacity to suffer), *biocentric*, and *ecocentric*—the animal welfare, life-based, and ecological integrity approaches respectively. (Note that I refer to the first of these newer approaches as *pathocentric* rather than *zoocentric*, i.e., animal centered. This is because the leading animal welfare ethicists accept that not all animals can suffer [e.g., sponges and corals], and their approaches focus on those animals than *can* suffer as opposed to focusing on all entities that are formally classified as animals. These approaches are, after all, animal-*welfare*-oriented approaches, not just animal-oriented approaches.) The discovery of this new ethical landscape represented the ethical equivalent of people having believed for thousands of years that they lived at the center of the universe and then in relatively short order finding that their inquiries were necessitating the contemplation of a massively greater range of possibilities: perhaps we just live on a planet in a sun-centered solar system; perhaps our solar system is just one of countless others in a galaxy of stars; ditto our galaxy relative to other galaxies in the universe; and, perhaps, even ditto the universe itself!

Even so, this relative explosion of ethical interest beyond the long-standing traditional confines of human-centered ethical thinking was nevertheless very late in coming, and the stranglehold of the anthropocentric ethical orthodoxy did not make it easy for the pioneers in this area. Indeed, those philosophers who initiated these developments can tell you that many of their mainstream colleagues at the time engaged in the philosophically time-honored put-down of declaring that what they were doing was not "real philosophy" (in which case, God save us from "real philosophy"). Now all that nonsense has largely (but, alas, not completely) passed; these new forms of ethical thinking represent normal and often very popular parts of philosophical conferences; a variety of journals are either devoted to or at least publish papers that explore the issues raised by these new areas; and students vote with their feet to do courses in these areas.

But lest this paints too rosy a picture of the present state of things, it also needs to be said that although the newer forms of ethics have now been granted a legitimate seat at the philosophical table, as it were, it remains the case that the majority of ethicists and ethics courses still

ignore these new approaches even if they no longer actively disparage them. It is incredible to me that, in the early twenty-first century, I can pick up brand new books that purport to offer overviews of "ethics" only to find that they often simply omit any reference to, let alone contain detailed discussion of, the newer, nonanthropocentric forms of ethics. For many ethicists and their students, "ethics" still means "inter-human ethics"—and it means "interhuman ethics" so obviously in their view that they don't even call it "interhuman ethics"—or some such term; rather, they just call what they are doing "ethics," period. Thus, if you enroll in an "ethics" course at most institutions (or even if you enroll in a "bioethics" course), you are almost certainly likely to find yourself doing a course that is restricted to interhuman ethics (or, in the case of "bioethics," to interhuman biomedical ethics). In order to do a course that embraces the newer and larger domains of ethics that I have referred to, you generally need to enroll in a course that *sounds* more restricted than the above courses but is not, such as "environmental ethics." It is strange to think that philosophers schooled in the Anglo-American tradition, who generally pride themselves on using language clearly and precisely, still continue to use such outdated, imprecise, and, frankly, misleading titles for their ethics courses.

The Conception of General Ethics and Why We Need Such an Ethics

Sympathetic yet tough-minded philosophers generally consider that the further you want to go along the anthropocentric-pathocentric-biocentric-ecocentric path, the more difficult it is to sustain any kind of rigorous argument for your approach. The suspicion arose early on—and lingers—that some of the "further-out" of these approaches were fueled more by intuition and passion than by rationality and logic. However, the countersuspicion also arose—and lingers—that, as we have only recently begun to explore some of the "further-out" of these approaches, there may exist some arguments for these approaches that are much stronger than those that have been developed so far—and we won't know if we don't try to develop them.

So, does the term *General Ethics* just refer to a form of ethics that embraces the wide range of increasingly accepted concerns that have now been introduced to ethical discussion; that attempts to sort the

stronger arguments for these concerns from the weaker ones; and that, where possible, attempts to explore and develop yet stronger arguments across this broad range of concerns? In a (loud) word: *no!* General Ethics embraces considerably more than the concerns that I have mentioned so far in association with the newer, nonanthropocentric forms of ethics. Let me explain. The approaches that I have referred to—animal welfare approaches, life-based approaches, and ecological integrity approaches—are generally collectively referred to as *environmental ethics*. Thus, we have the older forms of interhuman ethics and the newer forms of environmental ethics. But what further forms of ethics could there be? If (for us) a basic way of dividing the world up is between humans and everything else (i.e., "the environment"), then surely interhuman ethics taken together with environmental ethics just about wraps things up in terms of the possible range of ethical concerns, doesn't it? What else is there besides humans on the one hand and everything else on the other hand? What else *could* we give ethical attention to?

The problem lies in the fact that either the term *environmental ethics*, as it has been used to date at least, is a misnomer or else the field of inquiry it describes does not live up to its own name. The reason is this: when we look around the world—our "environment"—we see people, other animals, trees and plants, rain clouds (evidence of ecospherical hydrological cycles) and so on, but we also see buildings, roads, cars, and so on. The world around us—our "environment"—consists not only of a self-organizing, natural environment but also of an intentionally organized, artificial, built, or constructed environment (as well as all manner of combinations of these two kinds of environments). Indeed, many of us in the modern world seem to have even more day-to-day contact with intentionally organized, human-constructed environments than self-organizing, natural environments. And yet, as we have seen from my brief review of the main approaches to environmental ethics, this new field of inquiry has to date been overwhelmingly concerned with the natural environment (or various members or aspects of it)—sentient beings, living things, ecological integrity—and has had next to nothing to say about the intentionally organized, artificial, built, or constructed environment.[3] (I will just refer to the intentionally organized, artificial, built, or constructed environment as the *human-constructed environment* for now—although I will identify this realm in a more formal way and give

it a more precise name when we come to the theory of responsive cohesion's *theory of contexts* in chapter 6.)

These two kinds of environments are quite different kinds of environments, and they can prompt quite different kinds of ethical questions. Even if we set aside the profound implications that questions concerning how we construct and live in human-constructed environments have for the natural environment (which is a lot to set aside since the fate of the natural, "green bits" of the planet is now completely bound up with how we construct and live in the human-constructed, "brown bits" of the planet), there remain a multitude of important ethically related questions that we can ask about human-constructed environments themselves. Consider this example: suppose we take two buildings and, for argument's sake, specify the following about them: (i) both have the same overall environmental impact; neither detracts from whatever value we might assign to ecological integrity any more than the other (and we'll also assume here that neither contributes to harming individual sentient beings or living things in general any more than the other); (ii) one of these buildings, to your and my discerning eyes, is "as ugly as sin," "sticks out like a sore thumb," is a "blot upon the landscape," and so on, while the other fits in beautifully with its surrounding landscape— "the line of its roof echoes those hills over there," and so on; and (iii) notwithstanding the previous point, it turns out that people in general "don't mind" the contextually ugly building when their preferences are considered overall—in fact, maybe they even prefer it overall—because, whatever its faults, it is "just so convenient," or offers easier parking, or has stores that offer cheaper prices. Whatever the reasons, suppose that these reasons get all mixed together with whatever preferences people might (or, alas, might not) have in terms of architectural design such that the users of the contextually ugly building come to see it as not even being particularly ugly—or perhaps just come not to *see* it in various ways, such as in terms of any wider contextual understanding.

Surely there are ethically related questions that we can ask about these buildings, and foremost among them is this: Should we build in the contextually ugly way described in (ii) even if it's no worse, ecologically speaking, than building in more landscape-fitting ways, and even if people "don't mind"—or even come to prefer—using the contextually ugly

building to the landscape-"fitting" building when their preferences are considered overall? Is doing this consistent with the values we should live by? Or should people prioritize their preferences such that cheaper prices or more parking is simply not a good enough reason to accept contextually ugly buildings—especially since there is no reason in principle why these features cannot also be offered by a contextually fitting building. If we think that building in the contextually ugly way is consistent with the values we should live by, then we would probably feel that we ought to describe any personal preference that we might have for the landscape-fitting building as just that—as "just a personal preference," or as "just an aesthetic preference." But what if we think that we should take our spontaneous expression upon seeing this building that "there ought to be a law against it" seriously? What if we think that there is something wrong *in principle* with building in the contextually ugly way? What if we think that we should not live by the kinds of values that would sanction this kind of building (a building that seems to exemplify a disconnection from, and even a sense of contempt for, its surroundings)? Under these circumstances, we do not consider ourselves to be talking about a merely "personal" or "aesthetic" preference. Rather, we consider ourselves to be talking about an ethically based objection to building in the contextually ugly way—an objection that obtains regardless of points (i) and (iii) in the above example.

But on what grounds can we make such an ethically based objection? The older forms of interhuman ethics can't help us here in any direct way (although some of their theorists might twist and turn in theoretically ungainly ways to try to find an indirect way of addressing this problem—anything but abandon their approach in favor of a more appropriate one). This is because the older forms of interhuman ethics value people and people alone, and we've already seen in the example given that people either don't have much of a preference either way in regard to these buildings or else actually prefer the contextually ill-fitting building overall because of its convenience in various respects. The newer forms of environmental ethics can't help us in any direct way either. As specified in the example, neither of the buildings is any worse than the other in terms of detracting from ecological integrity (and we also assumed here that neither contributes to harming individual sentient beings or living things

in general any more than the other). How, then, can these newer approaches hope to get any purchase on the issue—an issue that resides at the intangible and ephemeral level of contextually related design?

This example highlights a profoundly important problem. Quite apart from their ecological implications, there are many serious, ethically based problems—problems relating directly to the values we should live by—that we ought to be able to explore in regard to our (too often thoroughly dispiriting) human-constructed environments. Yet we have no language, no framework, for approaching these problems as *ethical* problems. We spontaneously say "There ought to be a law against it" when we see certain kinds of buildings—which is a pretty strongly for-mulated, normatively laden reaction—yet we then back down when challenged on our view by describing our reaction as a merely "personal preference" or "aesthetic preference." I think we do this because we don't know how to say in *ethically* weighted terms what we really want to be able to say.

If this is right, then we need an approach to ethics that goes beyond even the newer, natural-environment- (and natural-entities-) oriented approaches that have been developed to date since, like interhuman eth-ics, these approaches cannot offer us any direct help when we start to consider certain kinds of problems relating to how we should proceed in regard to our intentionally organized, human-constructed environ-ment. If we think of the world as consisting of a biophysical realm (which includes ecosystems and the plants and animals that live in them), a realm of symbolic culture (which is constituted by language-using human moral agents), and a realm of material culture (which includes all the "stuff" that humans make), then we can see that whereas the older forms of interhuman ethics were concerned only with those entities that exist in the second of these realms (i.e., humans), the newer forms of (so-called) "environmental" ethics—the animal welfare, life-based, and ecosystem-integrity approaches—have been concerned with both the first and the second of these realms (since any argument for the value of nonhuman biophysical entities either builds on, or automatically incorporates, an argument for the value of humans). This is an improve-ment: giving ethical attention to two out of these three realms is better than giving it to just one of them. But a *comprehensive* approach to eth-

ics would provide a unified framework for directly addressing ethical problems in all three realms.

On a personal note, I have been aware of this "third realm" problem for some time. My own search for a General Ethics has been stimulated not only by my study of interhuman and environmental ethics and the many problems that they raise but also by my dawning realization that they both leave out the human-constructed environment and that a new kind of ethical approach is needed to address the issues raised in this area. I realized that the human-constructed environment has represented just as much of a "blind spot" for so-called environmental ethics to date as the nonhuman natural world has been, and remains, for the older, anthropocentric approaches to ethics.[4] Thinking about how to "get a handle" on the problems introduced by this nonhuman, nonsentient, nonliving, and intentionally organized (as opposed to ecosystemically self-organizing) "third realm," in which our lives are now totally enmeshed, has been of the first importance in developing the theory of responsive cohesion to be presented in this book. I thought that if it were possible to figure out a sensible way of coming to grips with problems such as the "two buildings example" offered above, then one might at least have a candidate for an approach that could, with suitable elaboration, be developed into a General Ethics. However, if one did not have an approach that could adequately address this kind of "third realm" example, then one did not even have a candidate for an approach that could be developed into a General Ethics.

All of which brings us to what I mean by General Ethics. General Ethics is concerned with giving ethical attention to all three realms and doing so within an integrated theoretical framework. It is this that enables us to describe General Ethics as being concerned with the development of an ethical "Theory of Everything."

In the light of what I've explained here, we can set out this conception of General Ethics almost as a kind of simple equation:

General Ethics = {interhuman ethics + animal welfare ethics + life-based ethics + ecosystem integrity ethics + ethics of the human-constructed environment}

It should immediately be noted here, however, that I have placed "fancy" brackets around this sum specifically to suggest that General

Ethics is not concerned simply with adding together different "bits" of the ethical approaches that are listed—as if that could be done coherently!—but rather with the development of an *integrated approach* that covers all these areas. Thus, "{ }" does not mean "simply add together what is inside the brackets," but rather "replace what is inside the brackets with a single integrated approach that both covers all the areas referred to inside the brackets *and* irons out the wrinkles between them." Developing an "{ }" approach to any area amounts to theoretical progress in that area. It is good work if you can get it!

With this understanding in mind, we can simplify the above "equation" as follows:

General Ethics = {interhuman ethics + ethics of the natural environment + ethics of the human-constructed environment}

Or even:

General Ethics = {the older forms of ethics + the newer forms of ethics + some even newer form of ethics}

Having now explained what I mean by a General Ethics—by an ethical "Theory of Everything"—it is relatively straightforward to explain why we need such an ethics. First, as we have just seen in regard to the example of the two buildings, we cannot adequately deal with all the ethical problems that we ought to be able to deal with *as* ethical problems if we do not have an ethical framework that can incorporate but also go beyond both interhuman ethical concerns and ethical concerns relating to the natural environment (including natural entities). Second, anyone who works in either the older or newer fields of ethics that I have referred to knows that "they do not add up"; they simply cannot be "glued together" in their present forms in order to produce some seamless "supertheory" of ethics that would constitute, say, two-thirds of a truly General Ethics. Not only are there spectacular conflicts between the claims endorsed by the older, anthropocentric forms of ethics and the newer, nonanthropocentric approaches to ethics, but there are likewise spectacular conflicts between the claims endorsed by the newer forms of ethics themselves—especially between the more individualistic approaches and the more holistic approaches (as we will see when I outline the problems that any General Ethics must confront, which I will do

both in the next section and when I return to address these problems toward the end of the book in chapter 10).

In my view, then, we badly need two things. First, we need an ethics that will allow us directly to address ethical problems (i.e., problems regarding the values we should live by) across the broadest possible range of domains of interest (i.e., including all three realms outlined above). Second, we need this ethics in a unified or integrated form; we need an ethics that can account in its own way for all the points that are worthwhile in the various "smaller" ethical approaches that have been developed to date, and yet one that can do this in the context of an overarching theory that offers clear priority rules when different kinds or levels of value come into tension or outright conflict. To have these two things—to have a unified theoretical framework that allows us directly to address ethical problems across the broadest possible range of domains of interest—is to have a General Ethics.

This much is easily said. But can it be done? The range of problems that a General Ethics must be able to address is formidable, as we will see in the next chapter.