

Annette C. Baier

Reflections On How We Live.

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This is a collection of essays about ethics broadly defined. As Baier explains, some of the chapters are essays ‘in the old sense’, and some are what we now think of as ‘professional philosophy papers’. Several chapters, especially those in the former category, contain Baier’s personal reflections on her own life. The last chapter, ‘Other Minds: Jotting Towards an Intellectual Self-Image’, is ‘unabashedly autobiographical’ (viii). Collectively, all sixteen chapters explore a variety of personal and philosophical issues in a lively, engaging way. One gets the sense that Baier is no longer afraid to include the ‘literary flourishes’ that she speaks of suppressing in the past (vii). The final product affords the reader insight into Baier as a philosopher, poet, and human being.

One chapter that stands out as a professional philosophy paper deals with our ethical obligations to future generations. In ‘The Rights of Past and Future Persons’, Baier argues that future generations *now* have rights that create obligations for us (1). Specifically, if future generations now have rights, then they have a right to a share of the earth’s resources. We cannot selfishly squander the earth’s resources without concern for their rights to what we enjoy. Ignorance of what they may value is no excuse. We know generally what human beings of the past, present, and future require for decent, healthy lives. And unlike earlier generations, we have achieved a level of self-consciousness that makes us uniquely aware of these needs. Baier captures the intuitions that many of us share concerning our moral relationship to future generations. Even if we do not express this relationship in terms of rights, many of us believe that the interests of future generations count in some way. Our lack of knowledge about the determinate nature of these interests does not entitle us to act carelessly in ways that will harm them (16). Baier’s timely observations set the conceptual groundwork for future work in this area.

In ‘Feelings That Matter’, Baier outlines an emotion that she reluctantly refers to as ‘chalance’ (161). We experience chalance in response to things that matter. In helping us identify this emotion, Baier asks us to imagine the following scenario: A woman has received a long-distance telephone call from a close relative. When the woman picks up the phone, her relative asks her if she is sitting down. Baier tells us that the woman will ‘at once’ know that she is about to be told something important (158). But while she senses the importance of what she is about to be told, she may not know whether it will be bad or good. If the news is bad, it may be the case that a loved one has suddenly died. If it is good, it may be the case that a son who had been missing in action has finally been found alive. The ‘hedonically neutral’ emotion that the woman will experience is chalance (158).

Baier may be right that such an emotion exists, but I suspect that many of us would respond to her imagined scenario with anxiety, concern, or fear. But chalance, she

insists, must not be confused with these other emotions. Chalance is an emotion felt for the important as such. Perhaps what Baier refers to as chalance is not a unique emotion, but a judgment of the important associated with a range of emotions felt for it—surprise, wonder, sadness, anxiety, fear, etc. The judgment may make an important cognitive contribution to the vague and indistinct emotions that are felt along with it. On this interpretation, there would be no basic emotion felt for the important as such; instead, judgments of the important would lend cognitive ‘color’ or ‘depth’ to other basic emotions.

In ‘Faces, and Other Body Parts’, Baier discusses the significance of the face, hands, joints, and navels. The face has practical value because it contains a person’s eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Together, these sense organs enable us to acquire and respond to crucial information about our environment. We—both human and non-human animals—communicate and express emotion through the face (244-5). The face is morally significant for us as well. As Baier observes, we are less likely to harm those whose faces we have seen than those whose faces are hidden from us. In addressing this point, Baier movingly describes her encounter with the face of an aborted fetus. As a student, Baier worked as a cleaner in a hospital where abortions were performed. On one occasion, a bundle in a trashcan that she was emptying came undone and revealed a ‘tiny dead baby’ (246). Baier recognized that it was a baby and not just a piece of human tissue, in part because it had a face. If abortion is ever morally permissible, she concludes, it is not because the fetus is not a person. Baier does not limit her analysis to humans; the lives of cats and dogs are also morally important because they have faces (246).

Baier denies that her account of faces amounts to ‘sentimental nonsense’. After all, she explains, our primary means of knowledge about another person’s mind is the expression on her face (246-7). Baier is undoubtedly right about this. However, we might wonder whether these observations about faces can be of much use to moral philosophers; for it is unlikely that we respond to faces in a consistent and systematic way. We may, borrowing Baier’s example, believe that fetuses are valuable because they have faces. But if faces are valuable because they express emotion, and a fetus (at a certain stage of development) cannot yet express or experience emotion, then the conclusion that fetuses are valuable, or are ‘persons’, does not follow. In this case, we may respond morally to the face of the fetus because of the emotions that are typically associated with human faces. We should, then, proceed with caution when considering the moral significance of faces and other body parts.

Reflections on How We Live is not written around a single theme. While several chapters touch upon questions concerning the good life, or the morally decent life, the book does not focus solely upon these or any other themes. Instead, it deals with a number of issues that are worth thinking about as philosophers and as human beings. Philosophers interested in ethics in a broad sense, or Baier’s work in particular, are sure to enjoy the reflections contained in this book.

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