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Nature and Religion as Moral Foundations

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The Moral Foundations of Nature and Religion

Storytelling and narrative have always been ripe mediums to explore and teach moral values. The prerequisite of conflict naturally implies at least two opposing perspectives, hence a moral dilemma, respective of how it is portrayed. Incidentally, the formats of literature – although at times constrained – align well with the task, allowing an author or playwright to display the origin, the current state, and the subsequent development of moral values. Of course, literary characters are not real people, but they allow us to consider and reflect upon aspects of reality and morality, nonetheless. Contemporary studies and opinions on morality emphasize its subjectivity, while the ‘outdated’ viewpoint, originating with the philosophers of antiquity, emphasize morality’s objectivity, of there being a universality to moral thinking and decision-making. Jeremy Hawthorn, in his work *Studying the Novel*, talks about how the times in which a work was made reflects its narrative techniques and its underlying themes¹. Any work would naturally be an insight, to varying degrees, to the norms, ideologies, and philosophies of the time in which it was made. This thesis seeks to compare the two works in question and how, respectively, aspects of nature and religion portray their moral landscapes through themes, symbols, and characters. By doing this the text will show how our underlying moral values have deteriorated, and how conforming to moral subjectivity compounds upon this very deterioration. For a solution, the text will propose – through an analysis of the presented works – a set of moral values that aligns itself more with nature.

In recent years there has been a drastic decline in religious belief². Opinions as to why such a change has taken place are many and varied, but with its decline many are surely reeling from losing the foundation which has for centuries upheld the moral pillars of one’s identity. The latter half of this thesis will focus on is how the decline in religious belief might have affected the general human consciousness in a more spiritual way, a fact which is represented in the underlying moral landscape of the literature in question. Alongside religion there has also been a decline in our relationship with nature. What started with the industrial revolution has coalesced into a widespread destruction of natural habitats, an acceleration of species

¹ Hawthorn’s work focuses primarily on the novel, but many of the discussed concepts are interchangeable with other literary mediums such as drama, tragedy, or the short story.

² Respective articles by Ronald Inglehart and Jon Miller note a peak in religious belief at turn of the 21st century, but since then religion has been on a general decline across several countries.

extinction, and several clashes with indigenous tribes and people³. Recently there has been a clear resurgence of a care for nature, especially in Norway, with the emphasis on being environmentally friendly in nearly all business practices. Though in cases such as Fosen Vind clashing with the Norwegian indigenous people, there is clearly a disconnect between what is presented as being good for nature and what really is.⁴ The anthropologists, in response to this desecration of nature, have coined the term ‘deep ecology’, a philosophy tied to the preservation of all life on our planet, not only that which is directly tied to our utility and well-being⁵. In the first half of this thesis, the focus will be on how nature affects moral judgement and decision making. The symbiosis of nature and religion has influenced decision making and moral values since the dawn of mankind. Countless indigenous tribes worshipped natural phenomenon and made sacrifices in their names. The Greeks worshipped the likes of Zeus, Poseidon, and Helios, gods attributed with thunder, the sea, and the sun. Now, however, what was once a manifestation of God’s wrath is considered a visible discharge of electricity in the form of lightning. The circle of causality that once touched the heavens can now be fully discerned by the scientists of our time.

The two works in question are, of course, William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Of the two aspects of morality that are highlighted above – namely nature and religion – it is nature which will be the hardest to define. During this thesis nature is taken to signify several things. It will signify human nature as it pertains to their actions and justifications – for example, how humans have basic drives towards food, sex, security, play, and social status, as well as various wants and needs forwarded by evolutionary traits. It will also signify aspects of the human body, primarily the five senses – sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. Animals and objects of nature would also fall under this category – especially those animals which are not domesticated by humans, and the objects would pertain to trees, flowers, vines, etc. Lastly, nature will also take to signify natural phenomenon and concepts, such as storms, lighting, moon phases, tides, etc, and scientific concepts like time, causality, gravity, etc. In contrast to the natural, this text will also take note of objects and aspects which will signify the unnatural. The simplest distinction would be between unnatural and natural objects. A flower which had grown in a forest would of course be considered natural while something like hats or boots or clothes – objects which, yes, are made of natural elements – would be

³ These observations are taken from a UN article written in 2019.

⁴ The incident in question centres around the building of wind turbines in Same territory, something which the latter party argued disrupted the grazing of deer and the local wildlife.

⁵ ‘Deep ecology’, Britannica, written by Peter Madsen, 2013

unnatural because they are made by humans instead of directly made by nature. With human nature the contrast becomes somewhat more complicated. As a base rule an unnatural action would align with aspects that are tied to cultural customs or societal norms, two elements of society that are of human conception. There are, of course, grey areas to these definitions – as, for example, would a flower planted by human hands be considered entirely natural, and can nature as it pertains to human nature be so easily separated between what is cultural and what is natural. As the text will highlight, there are guidelines that simplify these distinctions, and should an ambiguous example arrive, the text will analyse and define the example as it pertains to the situation. Moving on, religion concerns itself with the divine, usually beings and/or forces whose influence supersede the laws to which the characters of the play must abide by. In any case, there is nothing supernatural or divine that occurs in *King Lear* – nothing which matches the supernatural elements of *The Tempest* or *Macbeth* – so the divine aspects of the plays have as much power as the characters give them power and credibility through their beliefs. *Waiting for Godot*, on the other hand, has various inconsistencies that can at a far stretch be classified as supernatural. In either case, the thesis will focus on the effect of the supposedly supernatural, and not on whether it is or is not supernatural. Beginning first with *King Lear* we see a closeknit bond between nature and religion as they pertain to moral values and decision making, but, Shakespeare being Shakespeare, not without a plethora of nuance.

The play begins by establishing a clear distinction between what is natural and unnatural, and what can be attributed to either definition. During their proclamations, both Goneril and Regan speak of a love that transcends their natural bonds. Goneril says,

Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter, / Dearer than eyesight,
space, and liberty, / Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare, / No less than life,
with grace, health, beauty, honour, / As much as child e'er loved, or father found,
/ A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable, / Beyond all manner of so
much I love you.⁶

While Regan says,

⁶ King Lear, 1.1.53-59

Only she comes too short, that I profess / Myself an enemy to all other joys /
Which the most precious square of sense possesses, / And find I am alone
felicitate / In your dear highness' love.⁷

The imagery Goneril uses – of words, eyesight, and space – are aspects of nature related to the physical and of what is natural to the human individual. Her proclamation that her love transcends such aspects of nature indicates its falseness. The dialogue is clearly portrayed as being overly flattering, with the intent of stroking Lear's ego so that the daughters do not risk losing the half of the kingdom they are to be given. The line "A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable," is something one is more likely to encounter between two lovers, not between a father and a daughter. Love can, of course, come in many different forms and variations, but nevertheless, one can draw a strict line between certain types of love – here specifically familial love and that between lovers. Regan echoes her sister, but also goes further in saying that all her love is given to her father, which Cordelia says is unnatural because half of her love should be given to her husband. Lastly, it is in Cordelia's speech that we see the truth of the matter, "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more, no less."⁸ Heart is here a symbol of a love or a human feeling that transcends the familial – the comparison can be made to blind cupid, a figure of myth that Shakespeare uses extensively throughout his plays, often as a representation of love's haphazard and unpredictable traits. This form of love, represented by blind cupid, could be considered an unnatural form of love in that it does not consider attractiveness or strength, two elements of evolutionary theory that are key to survival in the animal kingdom. Of course, familial love does not rely on strength or attraction. In the same vein, Cordelia's love does not transcend their natural bond, that of a parent and its child, and is therefore true and genuine. At the base level this then becomes the foundational moral system, that of the unnatural being classified as bad and wrong, while that which is natural aligns more with what is right and good. When one attributes that which is natural to nature and then acknowledges that there are strict rules and relations that nature abides by, one can also logically assume that there are laws to morality. This universality being, of course, related to a base set of rules and relations.

As to the divine aspect, Lear's character shows how tying together that which is religious and that which is moral leads immoral judgements. Lear's moral journey throughout

⁷ 1.1.69-75

⁸ 1.1.89-91

the play simultaneously aligns him more with nature's values and pulls him further away from the aspects of nature as they are attributed to the gods. This illusion, of what is natural and what is nature as influenced by the gods, is the crucial fallacy of Lear's character. He begins the play in a state of ignorance, blind to the aspects of nature unrelated to the gods, as shown by the love test and his relationship with his daughters. He greatly appreciates Regan and Goneril's bombastic proclamations, but entirely shuns Cordelia's. Lear presupposes that his will is that of the gods, that his justice is the natural justice of the world, not because it is objectifiable by any standards of right and wrong, or good and evil, but because his voice is that of the gods' and therefore it is rightful and just. In his outrage against Cordelia's proclamation of love, Lear invokes the gods,

Let it be so, thy truth be thy dower. / For by the sacred radiance of the sun, / The
mysteries of Hecate and the night, / By all the operation of the orbs / From
whom we do exist and cease to be, / Here I disclaim all my paternal care,⁹

Lear invokes the gods in making his decision because he believes his kingship and rule to be in accordance with the gods¹⁰. When he finally drives off the loyal Kent, he believes that the natural disasters of the world will strike him down because he has gone against the wishes of the gods, i.e., himself.¹¹ Later, when Lear hears of his daughters' betrayal, he cannot understand how someone born of his lineage could conceive such evils and copes with the situation by implying that they were born of an adulterous consummation, unbeknownst to him. Lear makes his moral foundation that of the divine, which becomes his flaw as a character. This is not to say that religion cannot be a sturdy foundation from which moral values can be built from. Instead, what is highlighted is that there is a foundation of morality beneath the divine that can be as strong if heeded.

The inherent strength of nature as a foundation for moral principles is also shown through Lear's character, specifically when considering the origin for his skewed perspective. When discussing Lear's decision making one must also consider its origin, not necessarily its reasoning, but from whence such a skewed rational may have come from. The two contenders that are primarily vied for on the topic are 1) that Lear's age has made him senile, and 2) that

⁹ 1.1.106-114

¹⁰ Paul M. Shupack explores this belief in his paper 'Natural Justice and King Lear'. He references an incident during King James' reign where the monarch hanged a cutpurse without a trial and without a hearing. The point of conflict was whether King James, being king and therefore God's chosen, could and should supersede common law because of his position.

¹¹ 1.1.166-170

he has had genuine change in perspective¹². It is a crucial aspect of the play because it determines much of Lear's moral culpability and therefore in what context his decision can be shunned or sympathized with by readers. One can attribute Lear's decision in act 1 to his senile behaviour and how it represents nature's cycles. Lear mentions the duty of the older generation to pass on their burdens to the younger, so that the older may "Unburthened crawl toward death."¹³ The use of "crawl" as a verb draws a comparison to how an infant moves about, strengthening the notion of it being a cycle, and hinting at Lear's state of mind. The Fool also compares Lear to a child and the daughters to scolding mothers as he says, "nuncle, e'er since thou mad'st thy / daughters thy mothers; for when thou gav'st them the rod / and put'st down thine own breeches."¹⁴ There are parallels to draw between how an infant must be cared for and similarly how someone old and senile must be cared for. The cycle represents the inevitable return to nature, that of leaving the world similarly to how one enters it. It also emphasizes the aspect of time as a law of nature that humans must abide by. By such logic one can say that nature always wins. Though there is evidence that vies for the contrary – that Lear made a decision completely within his wits¹⁵ - the reasoning is more than often contrived. Nature's effect on humans is an inevitable one, and therefore unavoidable – this being something that Lear learns later in the play. Similarly, moral principles that align with nature would also, to an extent, be inevitable and unavoidable – in the sense that they are an inherent factor of our existences. Of course, with Goneril, Regan, and Lear, one can ascertain that there are social factors that get in the way of a morality that aligns itself with nature.

In the next scene Shakespeare immediately provides the reader/audience a different perspective on nature, one which is in conflict with what has just been established. Edmund is the primary antagonist of the play and, in contrast to Lear, seems not at all ignorant of his relationship to nature and how it has affected him. His grievance lies with aspects that are, to him, unnatural. "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound. Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom and permit / The curiosity of nations to deprive me?"¹⁶ He invokes not a god or a goddess but rather represents nature as being his god – nature as primarily related to human nature and that which can be considered natural – and he contrasts

¹² In Francis' essay, 'King Lear: Moral Example or Tragic Protagonist?' the author argues for a viewpoint that has Lear entirely in control of his thoughts and actions, and that his decisions are not a case of senility.

¹³ 1.1.39

¹⁴ 1.4.154-155

¹⁵ Stanley Cavell holds this position in his essay "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*" where he argues that the entire love test was a political move by Lear to show the strength and unity of his family.

¹⁶ 1.2.1-4

such a law with the customs and curiosities of nations, aspects which are, strictly and symbolically speaking, of human invention and therefore unnatural. His perspective is further expanded upon when he reminisces over his consummation,

Who in the lusty stealth of nature take / More composition and fierce quality /
Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed / Go to th'creating a whole tribe of fops
/ Got 'tween a sleep and wake?¹⁷

He argues that a passionate consummation, maybe more in line with how animals would reproduce – the fact of females instinctively choosing partners that are the strongest or the most attractive – is superior to that of one made in a stale, tired bed that said cultural traditions has perhaps brought upon. Incidentally, it is after this proclamation that Edmund begins his scheming. His father, Gloucester, upon receiving the false letter from Edgar, his legitimate son, muses over the recent omens in nature that foreshadowed Lear's falling out with Cordelia, and now Edgar's supposed treason. The perspective of a parent and child having a natural bond is shared by Gloucester, but not in the case of Edmund, who he regrets having made in that flight of passion. Edmund, to his father's grieving, monologues,

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that / when we are sick in fortune,
often the surfeits of our own / behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the
sun, the moon, / and the stars; as if we were villains on necessity, fools by /
heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treacherers by / spherical
predominance, drunkards, liars, adulterers by / an enforced obedience of
planetary influence; and all that / we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on.¹⁸

To the reader this monologue establishes a new dimension to the play's portrayal of morality. By acknowledging the folly of omens Edmund disregards the possibility of being evil or bad by a godly, ethereal force, thus emphasizing evil as it can be conjured by pure human actions, as natural as the bond of a father and a daughter, or as natural as a storm. Edmund goes on,

An admirable eva- / sion of a whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition
on / the change of a star! My father compounded with my mother / under the
Dragon's tail, and my nativity was under Ursa / Major, so that it follows I am

¹⁷ 1.2.11-14

¹⁸ 1.2.111-118

rough and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star
in the / firmament twinkled on my bastardizing.¹⁹

Edmund mocks the notion that he was made evil because he was born under a cursed star or constellation. He fully acknowledges his evil nature would not have changed despite any outside influence and establishes himself as an agent of nature. Out of all the characters it seems to be Edmund that is both most in control of his actions and simultaneously not in control, because, as he acknowledges his inherent nature, he also becomes a slave to it. Though it is hard to excuse Edmund's cruelty in the same way one would excuse the cruelty of a storm. He is very much a force of nature in the play, but there is never anything unhuman about him. His evil is within the bounds of nature as we relate it to human will and actions. In contrast to *Lear*, here we see a clear separation between moral decision-making and religious beliefs, although nature, in this case, becomes a ready substitute when one seeks a satisfying answer to villainy. As the gods are all-powerful and omniscient, so is nature in a sense, and then the question becomes whether one is merely a substitute for the other. Edmund does not have the veil of religion to cloud his decisions, and yet he is still evil and unjust. Already it has become difficult to establish a pattern to the moral dilemmas as they pertain to nature and religion.

The Fool further complicates the matter by providing the other half of the nature vs nurture debate. The Fool character, as is common in Shakespeare's plays, offers many puns and more witticisms that – contrary to his name – provide much insight and expands upon the play's themes, often in offhanded ways. Although it is a morality play, *King Lear* does not seek to impart one single moral message that the audience can learn from – as was the case with the earlier morality plays from the Tudor period, such as *Everyman*. Rather, through its many different perspectives on morality and how it relates to nature and religion, it portrays a variety of outcomes to various processes of thought and belief. The Fool provides yet another perspective. When he thinks on whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman, he answers. "No, he's a yeoman that has a gentleman to his son; for / he's a mad yeoman that sees his son a gentleman before / him."²⁰ A yeoman – or a common man, as opposed to a gentleman, or a nobleman – is a madman if he sees in his son a gentleman before he himself is a gentleman. Whereas Edmund represents the nature half of the nature vs nurture debate, the Fool here provides us with the other half. Throughout the play we are given little to no context for why the characters act the way they do. We do not know why Goneril and Regan bear such ill will

¹⁹ 1.2.118-224

²⁰ 3.6.12-14

towards their father or what could have made Edmund the way he is²¹. In the play we receive the latter's perspective, but the daughters' reasoning, outside of their hunger for power and the notion that Lear's time has passed, are not shown to have any other motive beyond that. Of course, the lack of background information has its own effect. Edmund's significance to the play's wider themes and moral questions is significantly strengthened as it is not known whether his evil is his nature or a result of his upbringing – more likely a combination of both. All we have is Edmund's perspective on the matter, how he justifies his and others' actions, and we can infer and construe whichever small tidbits of information we can gather from his upbringing, but nothing is definitive. With morality being a matter of perspective it is very reminiscent of the modern viewpoint of it being subjective. Although underneath the subjectiveness there is still a certain consistency and logic. Not necessarily from the characters' perspectives, since we do not know what events in their lives made them the way that they are, but from the perspective of human nature. There is underneath it all a universality that is reflected by how the aspects of nature – something which is central to human existence – permeates moral decision-making regardless of the time in which the play was written. The contrasting perspectives of Edmund and the Fool highlight the uncertainty that the human social element portrays. Even if there are a set of moral principles that align with nature, there will still be deviations that come about because of social factors, and natural factors that are taken to the extreme.

In his work, *Shakespeare's Moral Compass*, Neema Parvini outlines a set of moral values that he argues is innate to human beings. He elaborates that these values have their origin with evolutionary theory, which, in turn, would indirectly tie the values to nature. This would presuppose a universality to morality that, if it does not make one's actions right and just, it will at least make them understandable. The central philosophy of his book is called the Moral Foundation Theory – mft for short – and here he outlines six aspects of morality that form the foundation of human moral decision making; Authority, Loyalty, Fairness, Sanctity, Care, and Liberty.²² The opposing force to this foundation, Parvini says, are the cultural moral values that vary depending on one's norms and traditions. Throughout *King Lear* there are several instances where cultural aspects/values clash with those that are natural or of nature.

²¹ Janet Adelman, in her essay, 'From Suffocating Mothers', points out the absence and misuse of the mother figures in *King Lear*. This fact, she argues, manifests in Lear as a subconscious hatred towards the daughters' and their, presumably, 'adulterous' conception. He can only rationalize, through his skewed viewpoint, that the daughters' evil is because of the unknown, maternal figure.

²² *Shakespeare's Moral Compass*, p 21.

As was first touched upon with the love proclamation in Act 1, vision and sight as concepts of nature are furthermore expanded upon throughout the play, specifically how they are easily manipulated through cultural and social factors. In act 4, scene 5, Lear claims that a king made by nature is superior to one made by artifice, (i.e., one who is the rightful heir vs one who is perhaps chosen by the people). He goes on, emphasizing the theme of sight and vision, exposing their fallacies in humans as it pertains to morality,

What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes / with no eyes; look with
thine ears. See how yond justice / rails upon yond simple thief. Hark in thine
ear: change / places and handy-dandy, which is the Justice, which is the / thief?
Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?²³

Lear goes on, saying, "And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst / behold the great image of authority. A dog's obeyed in office."²⁴ And adds, "Thorough tattered clothes great vices do appear: / Robes and furred gowns hide all."²⁵ Lear has a newfound perspective that emphasizes illusions interpreted as realities by a failure of the senses, most commonly with one's eyesight and hearing. He mentions how the one who barks loudest will be perceived as the strongest, and he references his daughters directly by noting how one's robes and gowns becomes a mask of nobility which perhaps hides an evil, inner self. In the same way Edmund, Goneril, and Regan's evil is hidden from the characters, so too is nature's true innerworkings hidden from humans because they must inevitably experience reality through faulty mediums. The faultiness of the senses also comes in large part because of an unnatural veil constructed of customs, culture, and social values that, as is especially clear with Goneril and Regan, do much to hide the evil that hides beneath.

One can construe, from a more philosophical viewpoint, that the omniscient aspect of nature in the play – and perhaps nature in general – does not adhere to its 'laws' on account of its 'sight' or a 'vision'. Nature is more akin to a machine-like autonomy that works behind the scenes of the play – and life – and is not, usually, visible with the naked eye without the help of certain unnatural instruments. Thus, the same can be said for nature's underlying moral principles. They are an inherent factor of human behaviour, but, nonetheless, subject to social illusions. Gloucester, alongside Lear, is one such individual who is shown to be blind to someone else's inherent nature. Although he berates Edmund for his consummation Gloucester

²³ 4.5.146-150

²⁴ 4.5.152-153

²⁵ 4.5.158-159

also readily believes the boy when he provides him with ‘proof’ of Edgar’s evil machinations. It is symbolically significant, and ironic – although perhaps a forceful case on the author’s part – that Gloucester only and immediately learns of his bastard son’s true nature after he has had his eyes plucked out by Cornwall. Though Gloucester now being blind to the world, he gains a newfound clarity to the characters’ terrible circumstances. “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; / They kill us for their sport.”²⁶ The omens and constellations that were once the forewarnings of evils to come is now replaced with the gods’ omniscience being likened to sport. One would hardly ever ask about the morality of boys killing flies. Nature could then be attributed to something unrelated to morality, something which is too indifferent, too baseless in its cruelty to have any meaning extracted from it. Whatever meaning we can extract from a moral system based on nature, it will be, inevitably, prone to error in the process of translation. Gods, which are often portrayed in the likeness of men and women, see and judge with their eyes, while nature – all its phenomenon implied – has no eyes or ears and therefore cannot judge.

Parvini’s six pillars establishes a pattern to moral values that helps narrow down morality’s alignment with nature. This, though it may not account for every human action and brand it correct or justified, is nevertheless a step in the direction towards a betterment of moral values. To take a character we have yet to discuss, let us look at Kent, Lear’s loyal servant, as an example. When the disguised Kent is asked why he would follow Lear, his answer is simple, because of his “Authority”²⁷. Parvini emphasizes that authority is not synonymous with power, “Authority is earned,” he says, “whereas power is usually bestowed.”²⁸ A crucial point of Kent’s servility is in his willingness to berate Lear when he has made a decision he himself considers to be bad. An equal sentiment is carried by the Cornwall’s servant as, after Cornwall has plucked out one of Gloucester’s eyes, the servant bids his master,

Hold your hand, my lord. / I have served you ever since I was a child, / But
better service have I never done you / Than now to bid you hold.²⁹

If Kent is then the embodiment of nature’s right and justified morality, then his opposite would be the conniving Oswald, servant of the unnatural daughters. Oswald follows his master unquestionably and without any apparent moral conflict on his own part. This, Parvini notes,

²⁶ 4.1.36-38

²⁷ 1.4.29

²⁸ *Shakespeare’s Moral Compass*, p 212

²⁹ 3.7.72-75

is in direct opposition to the moral foundation theory, and makes the character one of, if not the, most villainous characters in all of Shakespeare's body of works.³⁰ By viewing morality through these guidelines, one may finally begin to acknowledge a universality to moral decision making that is irrespective of religion or of an inherent, unmerciful evil – as that of a storm.

The crucial error to this perspective of moral theory is Edmund, who, seemingly within the bounds of nature, is the central villain of the play. Of the six pillars, Parvini recognizes in Edmund that of the third, namely Fairness. Edmund, being entirely opposed to the customs “that would hold him down because of a quirk of his birth”³¹, becomes a self-serving agent seeking to make right the unfairness he has been subjected to. But, “As evolutionary psychology maintains, however, pure selfishness, just like pure altruism, cannot subsist for long and, accordingly, Edmund's successes are short-lived.”³² What Edmund portrays is the extreme of one of the pillars, which, when lacking in substance from the other pillars – such as Authority or Care – becomes a crucial fallacy resulting in failure. A moral foundation based off nature is not altogether good, as there is good and evil to several characters who align themselves with nature, but with the foundation one can more easily discern where a character stepped wrongly.

Samuel Beckett's play provides an altogether different view of how religion and nature relate to morality and moral values. The format, the genre, and its more contemporary conception makes the play convey its material in a style very different to Shakespeare's. This harkens back to the idea of how the widespread changes in our culture have affected and transformed the means of conveying a story and what widespread, underlying moral values tie it to the time in which it was made. Beckett's first major success is widely considered to be one of the pioneering works of a style of theatre dubbed the Theatre of the Absurd³³ and of the existentialist movement. This philosophical approach coincided with the modern and post-modernist movements' emphasis on the “inner self”, and of exploring more ways in which stories could be told – for example, rejecting the common conceptions of what made up a ‘plot’ or what constituted a ‘character’³⁴. When delving deeper into narrative techniques and their history, Hawthorn emphasizes factors such as the “changes in the dominant modes of human

³⁰ P 223

³¹ P 269

³² P 269

³³ Martin Esslin, “The Theatre of the Absurd”.

³⁴ Hawthorn, p 66

communication” and how the greater use of an omniscient narrator runs parallel to the general disenchantment with a universal belief in God.³⁵ Communication in *Waiting for Godot* is one of the predominant areas of conflict in the play, specifically the struggle to keep conversations going – however meaningless they may be – and for the characters to stay on the same page when doing so. This extends also to their metaphorical communication with God. If anything, it is a work which reflects the author’s worldview³⁶. Through *King Lear* we have ascertained a general pattern to morality that ties it closely to nature. Anything that deviates from that pattern, like the two villainous daughter, and Lear and Gloucester (initially), are unable to reflect upon their morality because their foundations are either too subjective or unnatural. *Waiting for Godot* is more closely tied to religion, but we must first ascertain the state of the natural elements.

The dimension of time also emphasizes an aspect of nature in Beckett’s play, and although it is similar to the theme of nature and its cycles in *King Lear*, its portrayal is far more cynical. Alongside time there is a prevailing fact of uncertainty that permeates the play. It is shown through the characters, and furthermore how it muddles any conception of time that they have. In act 2 there is a stage direction that says the tree has grown leaves since being bare in act 1, indicating a long time has passed, but Vladimir and Estragon discuss their experiences in act 1 as if it happened the day before. There is considerable change in Pozzo and Lucky’s dynamics between the two acts, and the boy who delivers them the same message has no recollection of their previous encounters. Both characters embody this uncertainty, but Estragon especially exemplifies it. The faultiness originates with an unsurety that is prevalent throughout the play – an uncertainty of their circumstance and their purpose. Of the pair it is Estragon who is constantly questioning the where and why of their circumstances,

Vladimir: So there you are again.

Estragon: Am I?³⁷

And after Vladimir says Godot will come today, which is Saturday, Estragon questions whether its rather Sunday or Monday or Friday, infecting Vladimir with the uncertainty. By time being an aspect of nature and the characters being very unsure of their place in it, it goes to show a stark separation between nature and the characters.

³⁵ P 119

³⁶ An interview made into an article by Richard Stern portrays Beckett’s pessimism towards the world as it is. The article is titled, simply, “Samuel Beckett”.

³⁷ Act 1, p 11

Cycles are also apparent in *Waiting for Godot*, but very different from how they are portrayed in *King Lear*. Estragon remembers being beaten by a group sometime before each act begins, but he does not remember if they were the same ones as usual or someone new. Vladimir presses him on the subject in act 2, saying that he would have stopped them from beating Estragon by not aggravating them, to which Estragon replies,

Estragon: I wasn't doing anything.

Vladimir: Then why did they beat you?

Estragon: I don't know.

Vladimir: Ah no, Gogo, the truth is there are things escape you that don't escape me, you must feel it yourself.

Estragon: I tell you I wasn't doing anything.

Vladimir: Perhaps you weren't. But it's the way of doing it that counts, the way of doing it, if you want to go on living.³⁸

These unknown assailants represent a cycle in the same vein *King Lear* presents its cycles, but in Estragon's case it symbolizes various cycles of what is from the audiences' perspectives viewed as senseless violence. Although it is representative of a cycle it becomes hard to equate it with an aspect of nature. Nature's cycle, perhaps as it relates to the natural progression of the food chain, differs in that it, at least, seems to conform to an autonomy and a universal balance. Lear's mental regression comes about through a natural passage of time while in *Waiting for Godot* the cycle has, seemingly, no purpose from which the characters might place themselves in a natural continuum. Vladimir's song at the beginning of act 2 exemplifies the point,

A dog came in the kitchen

And stole a crust of bread.

Then cook up with a ladle

And beat him till he was dead.

Than all the dogs came running

And dug the dog a tomb

³⁸ Act 2, p 55

And wrote upon the tombstone

For the eyes of dogs to come

A dog came in the kitchen

And stole a crust of bread.

Then cook up with a ladle

And beat him till he dead.³⁹

Although it is partially framed as a retelling, the repetitive aspect is clear and works to reinforce the theme of a senseless cycle of violence. A theme which, in contrast to *King Lear*, does not concern itself with nature, thus, again, separating the characters from the concept. There is given no reason to the violence and therefore one cannot construe any moral foundation from it.

Another perspective on the flimsy nature of time could be emphasized by the characters' forgetfulness. Estragon, perhaps as a side effect of being uncertain of his purpose and position in the story – and in life – is also prone to repetition,

Vladimir: What about trying them?

Estragon: I've tried everything.

Vladimir: No, I mean the boots.

Estragon: Would that be a good thing?

Vladimir: It'd pass the time. I assure you, it'd be an occupation.

Estragon: A relaxation.

Vladimir: A recreation.

Estragon: A relaxation.⁴⁰

And,

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

³⁹ Act 2, p 53

⁴⁰ Act 1, p 64

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.⁴¹

The discrepancies with time might more so be a commentary on the repetitive nature of their lives, of one day seething over to another with little to no distinguishing aspects. It might also be that the audience/readers only experience the story on the two days where changes have taken place. Forgetfulness would then be a natural consequence of their lives' repetitive nature, except in such a regard it might be equated with the routinely and habitual lives of animals. In his seminal work, "On the Use and Abuse on History for Life", Nietzsche equates forgetfulness with that of the lives of herd animals,

Observe the herd which is grazing beside you. It does not know what yesterday or today is. It springs around, eats, rests, digests, jumps up again, and so from morning to night and from day to day, with its likes and dislikes closely tied to the peg of the moment, and thus neither melancholy nor weary,⁴²

And he goes on,

One day the man demands of the beast: 'Why do you not talk to me about your happiness and only gaze at me?' The beast wants to answer, too, and says: 'That comes about because I always immediately forget what I wanted to say.' But by then the beast has already forgotten this reply and remains silent, so that the man wonders on once more.⁴³

These observations draw a direct parallel between the characters' forgetfulness and herd animals, the latter being a clear aspect of nature. Later, however, Nietzsche expands upon this point in another work titled *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Here he equates forgetfulness with a loss of moral values and decision-making abilities, but, nevertheless, a general increase in happiness. He says that "...there can exist no joy, no hope, no pride, no real present, without forgetfulness,"⁴⁴ and goes further in stating that the man who cannot forget subsequently "cannot 'deal with' anything."⁴⁵ With forgetfulness comes a sort of autonomy that cannot coincide with morality. Like the herd animals who go about their days in a state of mindless,

⁴¹ Act 2, p 58

⁴² Nietzsche, "On the Use and Abuse of History on Life".

⁴³ Nietzsche.

⁴⁴ *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p 45

⁴⁵ P 45

non-existentialist bliss, so too should the characters in *Waiting for Godot* live day to day without a worry of the future or past. And although Estragon and Vladimir have not quite reached such a state of mindless bliss, they are well on the path to achieving it. In *King Lear* there were clear ties between what was considered natural – or a part of nature – and morality, and oftentimes the more one was aligned with nature the more morally correct one's decision-making and moral values would be. To compare, in *Waiting for Godot* there is a clear separation between that which is moral and that which is natural or a part of nature, but not, incidentally, that which brings happiness to the individual.

Besides the four characters in the play the tree is the only object that seems capable of growth, being also the only objectifiable representation of nature in the play, as everything else is portrayed as a barren wasteland. Growth, in relation to the characters, is used very loosely. If anything, their development is more of a regression, as growth naturally implies a betterment. The tree is mentioned twice in act 1, firstly when Vladimir and Estragon initially acknowledge its presence,

Vladimir: He said by the tree. Do you see any others?

Estragon: What is it?

Vladimir: I don't know. A willow.

Estragon: Where are the leaves?

Vladimir: It must be dead.

Estragon: No more weeping.⁴⁶

Death, being a natural part of life, is portrayed as an end to suffering, perhaps the only solace from it. Later in the same act the two characters discuss hanging themselves from the tree as a means of passing the time, again tying together death and nature as two coinciding concepts. In a world where meaning is lost and unfound with religion, where morality is a senseless concept to which very little applies, in such a world death becomes the last chance at aligning oneself with nature, with the old, universal values, because with death one completes the cycle and returns once again to the nothingness of the void.

The Godot in *Waiting for Godot* represents the play's closest ties to religion and how it portrays belief. The character of Godot is commonly interpreted as being God, hence the abbreviation, and thus the two protagonists are essentially waiting for the arrival of God. God,

⁴⁶ P 15

in the play, is symbolically tied to purpose and meaning, a concept that is directly opposite to the exercises Gogo and Didi get up to during the play. The senseless violence Estragon experiences, the continuous flux of topics and conversations that have as a goal to pass the time and nothing more; whereas God would, supposedly and hopefully, supply meaning to the senseless violence, and provide a purpose that rids them of the monotony and the uncertainty that permeates their lives. If anything, it would make the pain and the monotony more bearable, with the knowledge that, perhaps, underneath all of it is a greater purpose that they are a part of. Religion in their cases would give them meaning and a moral foundation to their circumstance.

Lucky's speech in act 1⁴⁷ echoes the play's sentiment regarding God but delves further into the dynamics between Him and the characters. From a technical standpoint, the speech is two whole pages of one ongoing sentence that borders on incomprehensibility. What meaning can be extracted from it comes from fragments. Thematically, its haphazard formulation and general incomprehensibility portrays God's role throughout the play. The word 'qua' means God but when said continuously as in Lucky's speech, "Quaquaquaqu", it sounds like a quacking duck. The first half speaks of God's nature as being dispassionate and calm and yet uncomprehending which strongly suggests a sort of apathy on His part. The lines "labours left unfinished" and "for reasons unknown" are repeated several times throughout the speech but in slightly different contexts. Both lines, which seem to question God's plan, are contrasted as there is a sudden switch between the former and the latter half of the speech. The change comes when Lucky suddenly starts rambling off different sports, and pastimes which can in this context be interpreted as being, if not meaningless, then attempts at an escape from questions that might forward meaning – as distractions, perhaps, in the same vein that Estragon and Vladimir partake in various conversational exercises to pass the time. The religious elements in the play supply the characters with no meaning and subsequently do not tie a knot with any aspects of nature or that which is natural, a fact which is detrimental to the characters.

The speech is only begun at Pozzo's command, and Lucky can only speak when he wears his hat. If the hat is somehow symbolically representative of sophistication or human society, then a parallel could be drawn to it being a counterpart of what can be considered natural or of nature. Without the hat one does not concern oneself with the aspects of religion or what meaning it can supply to human lives – but even so the speech loses its enlightening

⁴⁷ The entire page takes place over pages 42-43

thread halfway through and continues with a haphazard blathering. Lucky's nature has him be subservient to the tyrannical Pozzo, but as is shown in act 2, their co-dependency becomes clear, which ironically gives Lucky the most meaning of all the characters. Another similar instance of symbolism is portrayed with Estragon's boots. Estragon begins his initial introduction attempting to pull off his boots. Once he manages Vladimir observes that, "There's man all over for you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet."⁴⁸ The boots and the hats, the former of which causes pain and the latter which leads to an acknowledgement of their hopeless situation, is an example of unnatural aspects causing further detriment to the characters. It follows with what is portrayed in *King Lear*, of unnatural behaviour or values being attributed to clearly evil decision – as they are contextualized within the play. With the hats and the boots being symbols of civilization and sophistry, their opposites – symbolized by bare feet and bare heads – would be that of animals, or of a state of being closer to nature. Here too, an alignment with nature is portrayed as something positive, something which alleviates suffering.

Of the six aspects of Parvini's moral foundation theory there is only one which can be clearly applied to the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, that being Care.

Where moral degradation seems endemic, human nature still provides the tools for mending itself: individuals seem capable of empathy and care, even in the most extreme of circumstances, and even after the point where it appears that hope is lost."⁴⁹

The world in *Waiting for Godot* is hopeless and unmerciful, and yet this element of one's natural moral foundation persists.⁵⁰ *King Lear* exemplifies the connections between nature and morality. Written at a time before the industrial revolution, the play portrays a moral landscape that clearly follows a set of universal moral principles. In cases where aspects both unnatural and religious form the basis of one's moral judgements, it is portrayed as being wrong and/or evil. The subjectivity comes in the form religious belief that are entirely variable from individual to individual. Jumping forward to the modern era of storytelling we see that even these flimsy moral foundations are withering. Religion does not contextualize their suffering as anything meaningful, and their sensitivities to the natural elements of the

⁴⁸ P 13

⁴⁹ Parvini, p 302

⁵⁰ P 18, Gogo and Didi embrace after a reconciliation. P 64-65, Vladimir helps Estragon take off his boots and sings him a lullaby to sleep. P 76-77, Estragon and Vladimir try to help Pozzo and Lucky. Their reconciliations are often forceful, in that they both realize that they have to reconcile because if they do not then they are left alone, and that is perhaps worse than the fate they now face.

world is slowly deteriorating. And yet, underlying this hopelessness are aspects of human nature that cannot be avoided. Even if one makes nature a foundation of one's moral judgement, it does not necessarily mean that one's decisions will be entirely correct and/or good but doing so is a step in the right direction and will make the decisions understandable by a common thread of logic.

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