



Everyday Ethics and Social Change: The Education of Desire

Anna Peterson

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Americans increasingly cite moral values as a factor in how they vote, but when we define morality simply in terms of a voter's position on gay marriage and abortion, we lose sight of the ethical decisions that guide our everyday lives. In our encounters with friends, family members, nature, and nonhuman creatures, we practice a nonutilitarian morality that makes sacrifice a rational and reasonable choice. Recognizing these everyday ethics, Anna L. Peterson argues, helps us move past the seemingly irreconcilable conflicts of culture and refocus on issues that affect real social change.

Peterson begins by divining a "second language" for personal and political values, a vocabulary derived from the loving and mutually beneficial relationships of daily life. Even if our interactions with others are fleeting and fragmentary, they provide a viable alternative to the contractual and atomistic attitudes of mainstream culture. Everyday ethics point toward a more just, humane, and sustainable society, and to acknowledge moments of grace in our daily encounters is to realize a different way of relating to people and nonhuman nature—an alternative ethic to cynicism and rank consumerism. In redefining the parameters of morality, Peterson enables us to make fundamental problems such as the distribution of wealth, the use of public land and natural resources, labor and employment policy, and the character of political institutions the preferred focus of debate and action.

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