

The Terrifying Concupiscence of Belonging: Noise and Evil in the Work of Michel Serres

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In this paper I examine the conception of evil and the prescriptions for its mitigation that Michel Serres has articulated in his most recent works. My explication of Serres's argument centers on the claim, advanced in many different texts, that practices of exclusion, motivated by what he calls "the terrifying concupiscence of belonging," are the primary sources of evil in the world. After explicating Serres's argument, I examine three important objections, concluding that Serres overestimates somewhat the role of exclusion in perpetuating evil and that his prescriptions for mitigating evil are excessively optimistic.

The question of evil has been among the most persistent themes in the work of Michel Serres. Although he has examined evil from different points of view in his various texts, Serres has been consistent in emphasizing its intimate connection with identity. More specifically, he has argued that the origin of evil lies in our tendency to consolidate our identities through practices of exclusion. In what follows, I will begin by arguing that Serres's account of this tendency is best understood with reference to the concept of noise, which he borrows from information theory. I will then examine in detail the proposals that Serres has advanced in works published over approximately the last fifteen years for addressing the problem of evil. Finally, I will offer a critical evaluation of these proposals, arguing that Serres considerably overstates the importance of identity and the exclusion of noise in perpetuating evil, and consequently that he overestimates the degree to which renouncing the struggle against the noise can contribute to eliminating it. Nonetheless, I argue that with certain modifications, Serres's account can provide important tools both for understanding and for mitigating evil.

I. Noise and the Formation of Identity

In some of his most important early works, Serres gives an account of the formation and consolidation of identity, both collective and individual, in terms of the basic concepts of information theory. Broadly speaking, information theory is concerned with understanding the process by which messages, which are encoded by their senders and transmitted across channels of communication, are received and decoded at their points of destination. The insight from information theory that is most important for Serres's project is that in any act of communication, the message that the sender intends to convey will be distorted to at least some degree by the properties of the channel of communication across which it is sent. A message that is broadcast by radio, for example, might be distorted by static to such an extent that the receiver misunderstands it, or even fails to receive it at all. The message conveyed by a handwritten note might be distorted by the sender's misspellings or by her bad handwriting. Even in face-to-face verbal communication, the sender's message might be distorted by her mispronunciations or by a regional dialect to which the receiver is unaccustomed.¹ In the language of information theory, these phenomena that manifest themselves as interfering with the reception of a message—static, non-standard pronunciations, dialects, stuttering, misspelling, etc.—are called noise. It is Serres's thesis that we become who we are, that we consolidate our identities, by excluding this noise.

In the essay "Platonic Dialogue," Serres presents the interlocutors in Plato's dialogues as examples of this phenomenon. A common interpretation of these dialogues holds that the relation between the interlocutors is best understood as one of opposition. But according to Serres, the interlocutors are more basically on the same side, struggling

together to hold at bay the noise that threatens ceaselessly to disrupt their search for truth. For Serres, “to hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him; a successful communication is the exclusion of the third man.... We might call this third man the *demon*, the prosopopeia of noise.”² In Book X of *The Republic* for example, Socrates and Glaucon struggle together against the noise that interferes with the intellection of the forms. In order to help Glaucon to conceive the form of a bed, Socrates emphasizes its difference from beds in appearance, i.e., from particular beds with their particular colors, sizes, and shapes, seen from particular points of view.³ Particular beds function as the media or channels through which the idea of the bed is made manifest. But like bad handwriting or radio static, they inevitably interfere with the clear, undistorted conception of the idea. One becomes a philosopher, then, by learning how to perceive the ideal through the noise of the sensuously given particulars that typically conceal it. In a similar way, one becomes an English speaker by learning to exclude the almost limitless variety of sounds that the human voice can make but that do not function as carriers of signification within the language. And one develops a consistent moral point of view by learning to exclude certain dimensions of practical experience as noise. One becomes a Kantian, for example, by learning to experience the inclinations as a kind of moral noise, interfering with the reception of the pure moral law.

Importantly, what counts as the message and what counts as noise depends on one’s point of view. To exemplify this idea, Serres asks the reader to imagine herself engaged in conversation at a party that she is hosting. At some point the conversation is interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. From the point of view of the host who is engaged in conversation, the ringing telephone is noise: it interrupts the ongoing

exchange of messages. But as soon as the host answers the telephone, that same conversation becomes noise: it interrupts the exchange of messages between her and the caller. This new conversation, brought into existence by the noise of the ringing telephone, creates a new we, a new community whose continued existence depends on excluding the noise of the party. From the point of view of the guests, who are excluded from the we that consists of the host and the caller, it is the telephone conversation that counts as noise. The guests now constitute a separate we, whose continued existence depends on excluding the noise of the telephone conversation.⁴ What counts as message and what counts as noise, then, depends on one's relation to various we's or communities of meaning. From within the community of those whose consistent moral perspective is broadly Kantian, the pure moral law counts as the message and the inclinations count as the noise. But for those outside that community, the pure moral law counts as noise: they will likely experience it as a distorted version of something else, such as self-love or utility. Likewise, for those within the community of people who appreciate the works of John Cage, what normally counts as background noise—the sounds of pages of music being turned, of listeners shifting in their seats, of air conditioning systems, etc.—is itself experienced as the message. For those outside this community, the background noise is just noise.

This perspective-dependence of noise and message contributes to the rigidification of group identities and to the establishment of oppositional relations with others. A community reinforces both its own identity and its difference from other communities by producing what the latter perceive as noise. On the one hand, this production of noise constitutes an unambiguous gesture of exclusion. In-jokes, “talking

shop,” and abbreviated references to a shared history are common examples: the outsider experiences these as noise and thus as obstacles to his participation in the group. On the other hand, this production of noise strengthens the bonds of recognition that hold the community together: *we* are the ones who can understand this noise. In his recent book, *Le Mal propre: Polluer pour s'approprier?*, Serres describes this behavior as a kind of territory marking, not unlike the tiger's marking the limits of his territory with urine. Referring to the Gascon dialect of French that he speaks, Serres observes that “when the French hear me speak, they know immediately that I was not born in Dunkirk, or in Landivisiau, or in Niedermorschwihr. Trace of alterity within belonging, noise or waste within language, my accent projects my own place within the common place. I hold on to my place of birth by means of the noise that my language makes.”⁵

To affirm one's identity in this way is necessarily to close oneself off, at least to some extent, from those who do not share that identity. For if the noise that consolidates my identity as belonging to a particular community of meaning ceases to be experienced by the other as noise, then I become much less secure in that identity, perhaps even losing it entirely. The same thing happens if the noise that consolidates other groups' identities ceases to be experienced by me as noise. To the extent, for example, that I come to understand the grievances of the Palestinian people, articulated in terms of a history and a religion that I do not share, as something other than noise, I put in question my identity as a staunch defender of Israel's cause. And for reasons that can be described once again in terms of information theory, that is precisely what I am unlikely to want to do. Noise manifests itself as a force of disruption or, at worst, of destruction, and thus as something that must be held at bay or eliminated entirely. From the perspective of a community of

meaning, the noise is an evil that must be repressed. In carrying out this repression, the group positions itself as “the good, the just, the true, the natural, the normal.”⁶ The community, consolidated by these processes of exclusion, is good. The noise is evil.

II. Renouncing the Struggle against the Noise

It would not be an exaggeration to state that the whole of Serres’s ethical philosophy is grounded in his insistence that this equation of noise and evil is profoundly mistaken. According to Serres, it is the struggle against the noise, along with the “passion for belonging” with which it is inextricably linked, that is the source of “all the evil in the world.”⁷ There are, of course, manifestations of the passion for belonging that are more or less benign, such as cheering for one’s favorite sports teams.⁸ But many of its manifestations, including racism, sexism, and homophobia, constitute serious social evils.

For the sexist man, a woman’s articulation of her own experience is mere noise:

“everybody” knows that women are impossible to understand. To make the effort no longer to hear women’s articulations of their experience as noise would be to put in question the man’s identity; his unwillingness to do so contributes to the perpetuation of very real harms and injustices against women. The passion for belonging also manifests itself as nationalism and war: we, the good, must protect ourselves from the others who cannot be reasoned with and who, as is often said, can only understand the language of force. For Serres, then, the solution to the problem of evil consists in our renouncing the struggle against the noise, and along with it the “terrifying concupiscence of belonging.”⁹

Serres develops this idea in *The Parasite* through a close reading of Jean de La Fontaine’s fable “The Gardener and his Lord.” The gardener of the story has enclosed his garden with a hedge, thereby demarcating a space that was to be wholly his own. Within

this space, the gardener maintained a kind of closed economy: the vegetables that he grew were consumed within the household and the flowers were used to make bouquets for his daughter. One day, however, the gardener discovered that the closed system had been breached by a hare, which he found nibbling on his vegetables. From the perspective of the gardener's closed system, the hare is evil; it is a noise that disrupts what is proper, inserting itself between the gardener's labor and his consumption of its products. Eager to chase the hare from the enclosed garden, but unable to do so himself, the gardener called to his aid the local lord. But in attempting to chase the hare from the garden, the lord's horses trampled on the vegetables and tore a hole in the hedge far wider than the one through which the hare had originally entered. The lord and his retinue ended up doing "more damage in an hour than all the hares of the province would have done in a hundred years."¹⁰ The struggle against the noise, in other words, produces far more evil than the noise itself. Clearly it would have been better for the gardener to learn to live with the noise. Indeed, Serres believes, there is no alternative; there is no such thing as an inside—proper, pure, and good—that would be wholly closed off from the noise outside. "There is always a hare in the garden. There always was a hare..."¹¹ Tolerance, according to Serres, begins with this insight, "and maybe morality as well."¹²

In the works that he has published within approximately the last fifteen years, Serres has expressed optimism about our capacity to learn to live with the hare in the garden. This optimism is based in part on the new experience of space that is made possible by the increased interconnectivity that accompanies the processes of globalization. Serres provides an intuitively compelling example of this new conception of space in *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*:

If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant.¹³

In this new, topological conception of space, the rigid distinction between inside and outside, between what is proper and what is not, breaks down. With the advent of the mobile telephone, for example, the positions in space that are occupied by my interlocutor and me become less and less important. Although we may occupy distant positions on the ironed and flattened-out handkerchief, the mobile telephone helps to render us virtually neighbors.¹⁴ Likewise, the Internet allows me to access *Le Monde* (and hence, *le monde*) as easily as I can access my hometown newspaper. On the flattened-out handkerchief, I am separated from France by a great distance. Nonetheless, I do not experience events in France—the recent debates concerning national identity and the role of religious expression in public life, for example—as mere noise. Indeed these events interest me and shape my consciousness of the world to a far greater extent than most events that take place in my own hometown.

Serres expresses this point in a compelling way in *Atlas* when he insists that “we are not beings-there [*des êtres là*].”¹⁵ The idea of being-there does articulate something important about the lives of non-human animals, which cannot survive outside the places to which they have adapted. The arctic hare, for example, with its thick coat of white fur and its strong claws for digging into the tightly packed snow, *is* in an important sense *there*. As a description of human life, however, being-there is both false and morally

problematic. It is false because in the topological space described above, the notion of place, of a fixed “there,” loses much of its sense. And it is morally problematic because it reinforces the processes of exclusion and the passion for belonging that Serres believes are the sources of evil. One of the most important pieces of information we typically want to know about the people we meet is where they are from. This concern presupposes a kind of identification between “*le où et le vous*,” the “where” and the “you,” which Serres finds “strange, tragic, oppressive, and worn out. Cause of violence and of war.”¹⁶ With the decreasing importance of place that is made possible by global interconnectedness, however, we can begin to think of ourselves less as *être-là* and more as *être-n’importe-où*, as being-anywhere.

Serres’s confidence in our ability to renounce the passion for belonging is also based on a new experience of time, made possible by recent discoveries that allow us to determine with a high degree of precision the age of the universe and of everything in it.¹⁷ Serres develops this point by means of a humorous anecdote:

When last December I asked the attendant in the skeleton room of a museum of natural history the age of a giant saurian, he responded:
--One-hundred twenty million years, eleven months.
--How can you calculate such a precise date? I asked.
--Easily, he said: the museum hired me in the middle of last winter. At that time the pedestal read “one-hundred twenty million.” Count it up, it comes out just right.¹⁸

Of course we cannot calculate the age of the giant saurian as precisely as that, and so it might strike us as funny that the attendant would even consider the eleven months that had elapsed since he had been hired. But, Serres argues, in our everyday, common-sense conception of time, we commit an error even more ridiculous than the museum

attendant's. As individuals we tend to regard as "our own" only the time that has passed since our births. In fact, however, each of us is irreducibly multitemporal: in our bodies are gathered together times of vastly different scales. Our brains, for example, contain parts that date from hundreds of millions of years ago along with parts that are as new as the genus *Homo*. The structure of DNA is more than three billion years old, while the hydrogen and carbon atoms of which we are composed are as old as the universe.¹⁹ Likewise, we tend to identify with "our" cultural traditions, languages, and religious practices, ignoring our common cultural inheritance, which dates back to the moment that Lucy began walking upright, and which includes the cave paintings at Lascaux, the invention of agriculture during the Neolithic Age, and the invention of writing.²⁰ Advances in our understanding of genetics and of anthropogenesis have brought to our attention the connections between our own history—the history of the United States or of the West, for example—with that of the Fuegians, the Australian Aborigines, and indeed the whole of humanity.²¹ Thus, to identify "our" time as the time since our births or as the time of our own culture is, to mix Serres's metaphors, to plant a hedge around the eleven months and to exclude the one-hundred twenty million years. Nonetheless, our increasing knowledge of human interconnectedness across time helps us to recognize this mistake and, if Serres's optimism is justified, contributes to the possibility of a more universal, less exclusive we.

III. The Pluripotent Subject

Of course this increased interconnectedness across space and time is a double-edged sword. New and wider connections certainly help us to renounce our impassioned identifications with particular states, cultures, languages, religions, etc. But in renouncing

these identifications we also run the risk of forming new communities that are even more rigidly exclusive. If connection between people is to be something more than an abstraction, then commonalities between them must be established. Serres offers as an example of this point the merchants of fourteenth-century Venice, who established profitable relations of commerce with the rest of the Mediterranean world. The new connections that these merchants formed were fraught with risk: speaking different languages, buyers and sellers might miscommunicate; buyers and sellers might disagree about the correct weights or sizes of the merchandise; or buyers might try to pay in impure coins. Disagreements such as these could prove very costly to the merchants. The solution to this problem was to normalize weights and measures, to come to an agreement on the value of different currencies, and to agree on a *lingua franca*.²² Those who agreed to these terms of cooperation benefitted, while those who did not agree were excluded. Critics have presented the contemporary phenomenon of globalization as a magnification of these kinds of standardizing practices and of their attendant evils. Some, for example, understand globalization as the creation of a homogeneous, primarily American, world culture that excludes or at least devalues local traditions. Others emphasize the economic standardization imposed by such global institutions as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund: in order to benefit from these global institutions, many underdeveloped states must agree to conditionalities that reflect the so-called Washington Consensus, which imposes a standard program of privatization, lower tax rates, and trade liberalization, and which does not take into account different states' histories, traditions, or the particular needs of their populations. In sum, these critics suggest that increased

interconnectedness does not weaken, but rather stabilizes and strengthens, the relations of exclusion that give rise to evil.

But the very possibility of such dissolutions and reformulations of identity presupposes a dimension of openness within us that exceeds and thus calls into question our existing identities. No matter how strongly I might identify myself with a particular group—Americans, philosophers, English speakers, wristwatch collectors, etc.—it is never strictly correct to say that I *am* an American, an English speaker, etc.²³ Rather, what is more me than any of these identifications is the dimension of openness and possibility that makes them possible in the first place. This dimension becomes especially salient whenever we leave behind our previous identities and take up new ones. For example, as I begin to learn to speak German, I still experience myself very much as an English speaker: I pronounce German words and construct German sentences just as an English speaker would. When I read a sentence correctly, I do so by translating each word into English. But if I persist in doing that, I will never be a German speaker. In order to effect the transition from monolingual English speaker to speaker of both English and German, I must stop orienting myself exclusively with reference to my native language. I must commit to reading, hearing, and speaking the German language on its own terms, even though that is precisely what I do not know how to do. Once I make that leap, I find myself disoriented, open to possibilities of sense that I experience as vaguely present, but that I cannot yet render determinate. I pick out some of the individual words, but for the most part I hear them as all run together. Or perhaps I pick out most of the words, but can't quite make sense of how they are ordered. If things go well, though, I will eventually catch on to the sense of German and I will forget this

experience of disorientation. At that point I will *be* a German speaker. Nonetheless, this middle position, open and saturated with possibility, is the condition of possibility for any kind of change in identity. If I am anything at all, then I am most fundamentally that open possibility.²⁴ The more exposure I have, willingly or not, to unfamiliar cultures, languages, religions, etc., the more salient that dimension of possibility becomes.

Serres compares our condition in this regard to that of a stem cell.²⁵ The most important thing about a stem cell is that it is pluripotent: it is not yet any particular kind of cell (a skin cell, blood cell, nerve cell, etc.), but it has the capacity to develop into almost any kind. We human beings are similarly pluripotent: we have the capacity to adapt to any culture, to speak any language, and to appreciate any kind of artistic expression. Our constant and relatively successful adaptation to so many cultural innovations in the contemporary world provides compelling evidence for this point. Our pluripotency, according to Serres, constitutes our true identity as human beings. To learn to identify ourselves first and foremost with this pluripotency, and no longer with the differentiated and opposed forms of life that it makes possible, would be to renounce the passion for belonging. This kind of identification is exemplified for Serres by Diogenes the Cynic. Asked where he came from, Diogenes declined to identify himself with reference to his native *polis*, insisting instead that he was *kosmopolitēs*, a citizen of the world.²⁶ It is also exemplified for Serres by St. Paul. Prior to his conversion, the Pharisee Saul had been “extremely zealous for the traditions of [his] fathers.”²⁷ This zeal inspired him to participate actively in the persecution of the new Christian sect.²⁸ After his conversion, though, Paul renounced the passion for belonging that had led to such evils: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor

female—for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”²⁹ Instead of identifying himself and others with reference to the groups to which they belonged, Paul came to emphasize the empty I which, like the stem cell, is nothing in particular and therefore potentially everything. The empty I is open: it is not identified by its relations of opposition with other I’s or with other kinds of I’s. It can be described, according to Serres, in the same way that Paul describes love: “It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.”³⁰ The solution to the problem of evil consists in our learning to identify ourselves with this open, empty, and thus universal, I.

IV. Critical Evaluation

I believe that Serres’s account of evil is a compelling one. Many of the world’s evils can certainly be traced back to the tendency of people to commit themselves too rigidly to their identities. And the language of information theory does, I think, provide a compelling way to understand that tendency. Nonetheless, there are some important objections that could be raised against both Serres’s account of evil and his proposal for its mitigation. The most obvious objection pertains to Serres’s claim, repeated in many different places, that the passion for belonging is the source of “all the evil in the world.” Surely this claim is too simplistic: there are many evils that we would understand very poorly if we attributed them solely to the passion for belonging. Many cases of child neglect and family violence, for example, can certainly be attributed to alcoholism, drug addiction, or high levels of stress. And despite the numerous criticisms that have been raised against her thesis concerning the banality of evil, surely Hannah Arendt is correct to note that at least some of the world’s evils can be traced back to our failure to

understand or to reflect on what we are doing. There are other evils, I would submit, that are connected in an obvious way to the passion for belonging, but that owe their persistence at least in part to our not knowing how to effectively address them. Racism in the United States is an example of this: even if everyone in the United States were to renounce his or her passion for racial belonging, the pernicious effects of centuries of institutional racism would still persist. Reasonable people of good will would find it extraordinarily difficult, even in the most favorable circumstances, to achieve a consensus on the most just way to right past wrongs. The cases of sexism, long-standing ethnic and religious conflict, and international economic inequality are similar in this regard. In light of this set of fairly obvious objections, I think it would be most charitable to interpret Serres as advancing the more modest claim that many of the world's evils have their source, at least in part, in the passion for belonging, and that the renunciation of that passion would contribute greatly to the mitigation of those evils.

Even in this more modest form, however, Serres's position is open to at least three serious objections, which I will examine in turn. The first of these pertains to the question of power, which is largely absent in Serres's work. Specifically, Serres's prescriptions for mitigating evil seem to disregard entirely the role that the passion for belonging can play in struggles against injustice and oppression. In *The Power of Identity*, an important work on the role of identity in the highly interconnected world of globalization, the sociologist Manuel Castells describes what he calls resistance identities, which are "generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society..."³¹ Castells's

most powerful example of resistance identity is the Zapatistas, a group of insurgents based in the southernmost Mexican state of Chiapas. The Zapatistas are primarily indigenous peasants who view themselves as unjustly disempowered by the program of neoliberal economic modernization undertaken by the Mexican government, and who place themselves more broadly within a historical lineage of anti-colonial activism that dates back to 1492.³² Importantly, solidarity among the Zapatistas is not based on traditional ethnic identifications; indeed, the people who constitute the Zapatista movement have historically been divided, not united by their ethnic identities. Zapatista solidarity instead emphasizes what the various ethnic groups that compose it have in common, viz. an unjustly disadvantaged position in Mexican political and economic life.³³ But the Zapatistas have also been unusually effective at making use of the technology of mass communication, including the Internet, to spread their message and to persuade people all over the world, most of whom do not experience the same kinds of oppression, to identify with their cause. If the Zapatistas and their international network of supporters are even moderately effective in their resistance to social and economic injustice, then it seems as if their renouncing the passion for belonging would contribute not to the mitigation of evil, but rather to its exacerbation.

I think it is certainly true that the passion for belonging can play, and indeed has played, an important role in combating genuine evils, and that an adequate account of the relation between evil and the passion for belonging would need to address the unequal relations of power that obtain between groups. But it is also important to recall that groups are almost always very bad judges in their own cases. In the narratives they tell about themselves, groups typically portray themselves as good and as opposed to other

groups, whom they see as evil. For example, in her classic history of the American West, *The Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia Nelson Limerick describes in detail the pervasive self-understanding of white settlers as “injured innocents,” victims of injustices perpetrated against them by the natives whom they were often violently displacing.³⁴ Another example is *Aum Shinrikyo*, the Japanese religious cult that carried out a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Members of the cult viewed themselves as forces for good, working to “save Japan, and eventually the world, from the war of extermination that would inevitably result from the competing efforts by Japanese corporations and American imperialism to establish a new world order and a united world government.”³⁵ Those of us who are not pioneers in the nineteenth-century American West or members of *Aum Shinrikyo* almost certainly recognize that their self-understandings are false, or at least extremely partial and one-sided. But the fact that both of these groups were so thoroughly convinced of the righteousness of their causes should give us pause. While these examples do not demonstrate that the passion for belonging always contributes to evil, they do, I think, give us reason to treat claims that it contributes to good in particular cases with considerable skepticism. Perhaps, then, a reasonable revision of Serres’s position could be stated as follows: given that we are more likely to err on the side of overestimating the goodness of our own group and the evil of others, and given that we are likely to do greater evil in overestimating this way, we ought to accept the renunciation of the passion for belonging as a default position and accept its contribution to good in particular cases only after serious reflection.

The second objection that I would like to consider represents a broadly communitarian point of view: one might argue that to renounce the struggle against the

noise and to identify, like Diogenes and St. Paul, with the empty, universal I is to undermine the very conditions that are necessary for the development and sustenance of moral experience. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, “it is an essential characteristic of the morality which each of us acquires that it is learned from, in and through the way of life of some particular community.”³⁶ Our education as moral agents necessarily begins in our relationships with members of our own communities, whom we love and trust, and whose expectations and judgments we take seriously. It is within the context of these relationships that our action in the world comes to have a specifically moral orientation: we learn to recognize particular goods as worth pursuing and particular models of the well-lived life as intimately connected with those goods. These goods and ways of living are irreducibly community-specific. To become a good father, for example, one must look to the models of good fatherhood exemplified in one’s own community. Of course every community has some conception of what it is to be a good father, and to some extent the conceptions of different communities overlap. But there is no universal conception of good fatherhood that would be sufficiently thick to effectively orient the behavior of particular fathers in particular communities. One has a good reason to act in accordance with a particular model of fatherhood because particular sons and daughters, wives, grandparents, and fellow community members in general expect and depend on it. In order, then, to live the kind of life associated with being a good father, one must identify with one’s own community, whose conception of good fatherhood one understands clearly. The same is true, of course, for one who aspires to be a good colleague, a good citizen, and even a good human being. According to MacIntyre, it follows from this “that *I* find *my* justification for allegiance to these rules of morality in

my particular community; deprived of the life of that community, *I* would have no reason to be moral.”³⁷

To translate this communitarian objection into the language of information theory, we might say that the cultivation and maintenance of genuine moral subjectivity presupposes the community conceived as a relatively noise-free system for the communication of moral information. According to MacIntyre, obeying “the rules of morality is characteristically and generally a hard task for human beings.... We are continually liable to be blinded by immediate desire, to be distracted from our responsibilities, [and] to lapse into backsliding.”³⁸ In order to combat these problems, it is essential that the community furnish its members with clear, relatively undistorted moral information. Practical subjects must be able to discern straightforwardly the moral sense of typically recurring situations: they must have relatively clear conceptions of their obligations to different persons or institutions within the community and of the modes of life that are made possible by meeting those obligations. If, for example, the members of a community lack a clear conception of what it is to be a good colleague at work—if they do not know very precisely what they owe their co-workers, their superiors, and their institutions, and if they are therefore insensitive to the feeling of pride that typically accompanies the consciousness of being a valued colleague—then there is a high likelihood that they will succumb to the temptations of selfishness and laziness. It seems to follow from this kind of account that communities can secure the necessary conditions of moral life only by closing in on themselves, excluding moral noise to the greatest extent possible.

Critics of this position have pointed out that communities have never actually excluded noise to the extent that the communitarian account of moral development seems to require. From the beginning, communities have been affected, and even produced, by migrations and hybridizations. In his *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Kwame Anthony Appiah describes his own childhood in Kumasi, Ghana where “Christians, Muslims, and the followers of traditional religions live side by side, accepting each other’s different ways without expressing much curiosity about them” and where one interacted regularly and as a matter of course with Indians, Syrians, Lebanese, Greeks, Hungarians, and various northern Europeans.³⁹ He explains that the textiles that are so closely associated with the cultures of West Africa were milled and sold by the Dutch.⁴⁰ Even the bagpipes are believed to have come to Scotland from Egypt via the Roman infantry.⁴¹ Appiah concludes from this that “we do not need, have never needed, settled community, a homogeneous system of values.... Cultural purity is an oxymoron.”⁴²

But even if we concede that actual communities are not, and perhaps never have been, quite as homogeneous and *gemeinschaftlich* as some have imagined them to be, there still remains something importantly right, both descriptively and normatively, in the communitarian objection. The communitarian is certainly correct to argue that the development and maintenance of moral subjectivity requires at minimum communities that are not so overrun with noise that they become unable to effectively communicate moral information to their members. But communities can and do achieve the requisite levels of noise reduction without having to be culturally pure or homogeneous. Communities may in fact be hybrids all the way down, but this does not by itself prevent

them from effectively communicating contentful, relatively thick normative expectations to their members. Contra an extreme (and perhaps straw-man) version of communitarianism, then, communities do not require for their survival an ongoing effort to exclude noise to the greatest extent possible. As Appiah's examples suggest, communities persevere not by fighting against the noise, but rather by integrating it and thus rendering it no longer noisy. That is why West African communities did not dissolve or become somehow less West African with the advent of java prints in the nineteenth century, and why Scottish communities did not become less Scottish with the advent of bagpipes.

The conclusion that I would like to draw from this consideration of the communitarian objection is that the choice between the extreme version of the communitarian thesis, according to which morality requires a constant struggle against the noise, and the extreme version of the Serresian thesis, according to which morality requires precisely the renunciation of that struggle, represents a false dichotomy. In the increasingly interconnected world, where the *vous* is becoming more and more separated from the *où*, Serres recognizes the possibility for new kinds of interpersonal and political relationships, entered into by subjects who identify themselves not primarily with reference to their communities, cultures, ethnic groups, religions, etc., but rather with reference to the open dimension of possibility that we all share in common. Over time, as Serres puts it, the connective will replace the collective.⁴³ But the word "replace," I want to argue, is certainly too strong. The processes of globalization that give Serres cause for optimism really do bring to light a dimension of open possibility that subtends our more determinate, particular identities. Nonetheless, it is just as incorrect to say that we *are*

that dimension as it is to say that we *are* Americans, English speakers, wristwatch collectors, etc. Identification with that dimension can never really replace our more particular identifications. Serres himself seems to have recognized this point in his earlier work. In *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, Serres provides an especially intuitive illustration of the relation between identity and the dimension of open possibility:

Have you ever tended goal for your team, while an adversary hurries to take a clean, close shot? Relaxed, as if free, the body mimes the future participle, fully ready to unwind: toward the highest point, at ground level, or halfway up, in both directions, left and right; toward the center of the solar plexus, a starry plateau launches its virtual branches in all directions at once, like a bouquet of axons.⁴⁴

To be a goalkeeper, one must be *être-n'importe-où*, able virtually to occupy numerous different positions at once. Preparing for the impending shot on goal, the goalkeeper experiences in an immediate, bodily way the open dimension of possibility. But of course the goalkeeper must also actualize that possibility, choosing one of the many possible positions and thereby becoming, at least to a certain degree, *être-là*. In the experience of the goalkeeper, then, *être-n'importe-où* and *être-là* are inextricable; there is no question of choosing one over the other. Likewise, the increased interconnectedness of the globalized world brings into relief a kind of pluripotent subjectivity that subtends particular, community-based identifications, but that cannot entirely replace them.

Although we have the potential to adapt to any culture, to speak any language, and to appreciate any kind of artistic expression, we must actualize that potential in determinate ways, in accordance with the norms of determinate communities. The connective, then, does not replace the collective. There is reason to hope, however, that it can render the collective less insular, bringing into relief the ways in which particular communities

constitute variations on a common human theme, and thus rendering our particular identifications less oppositional and violent.

The third and final objection that I would like to address concerns the relation between particular identifications and identification with the empty, universal I. The stem cell, to return to Serres's analogy, represents the empty universal: it contains potentially all the different kinds of cells. Nonetheless, the stem cell is a stem cell precisely in not being a skin cell, a blood cell, or any other kind of differentiated cell. Its identity, like the identity of anything else, is established by way of exclusion. The stem cell remains one kind of cell among others. The same is true for the person who renounces the struggle against the noise. If I learn to identify myself with the empty, universal I, maintaining a position of openness toward the whole world—with Australian Aborigines and Palestinians, Muslims and Hindus, plumbers and hedge fund managers—it nonetheless remains the case that I am not myself an Aborigine, a plumber, etc. My being who I am, the open, globalized subject participating in the universal we, excludes the possibility of my identifying myself with any particular, determinate we. Again, my identity remains one among others.

The practical consequence of this fact is brought out in an especially perspicuous way by Serres himself in his book *Detachment*, where he retells the famous story of the encounter between Diogenes and Alexander the Great. Alexander figures in the story as the master of war and by extension of the hedged-in space of social and political life. Diogenes, on the other hand, represents the ideal of openness: “he has forsaken exchange, damage, gift, selling and buying, value.... He has left comparison, from which comes all the evil of the world.”⁴⁵ In renouncing the attachments that give rise to rivalry and

conflict, Diogenes attempts to create the possibility for relations of peace. Paying a visit to Diogenes, Alexander asks “what do you want, what do you desire? My glory and my power are capable of giving you everything.”⁴⁶ Uninterested in the kinds of goods that Alexander is capable of bestowing, Diogenes requests merely that he step aside and stop blocking the sun. This story is typically taken to exemplify Diogenes’ disdain for worldly goods and for the oppositional relations to which they give rise. But Serres sees something different: in adopting the stance of openness, Diogenes sets himself up in a relation of rivalry with Alexander, competing for glory and winning. “I suspect this conceited dog to have dragged his barrel there, on the public square, in the fervent expectation of being able to provoke the king who would pass by, just as a spider stretches its sticky threads to capture flies. Playing the weak to be stronger than power.”⁴⁷ Even Diogenes, the self-proclaimed citizen of the world, establishes his particular identity through relations of opposition.

We should not conclude from this, though, that Serres’s prescriptions for mitigating evil are entirely impracticable and therefore futile. What the story of Alexander and Diogenes helps to bring out, I think, is that we cannot fail to make noise. Serres describes his Gascon dialect as making noise and thus as helping to establish a relation of belonging with the others who understand that noise. But even if Serres spoke perfectly unaccented French (supposing there were such a thing), his language would still be noisy for all those who spoke a particular dialect or who could not speak French at all. And if he spoke Esperanto, his language would be noisy for nearly everyone in the world. Likewise, the language of globalized, universal humanity, exemplified by the cosmopolitan Diogenes, makes noise and thus gives rise to relations of belonging and

exclusion. This strongly suggests that we cannot hope to extinguish the passion for belonging entirely. Evil, it seems, will always be with us. Nonetheless, the noise that Diogenes makes is at least less noisy than that of the nationalist or the racist. If Diogenes in fact harmed Alexander in some way by requesting that he step aside, then that harm was certainly less severe than the kinds that have resulted from other, more common forms of exclusion. And this suggests that although Serres's prescriptions of openness, connection, and tolerance will never result in the eradication of evil, they nonetheless constitute an important contribution to its mitigation.

¹ Michel Serres, "Platonic Dialogue" in *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 66.

² *Ibid.*, 67. Italics in original.

³ Plato, *The Republic*, 596a-598d.

⁴ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 66.

⁵ Michel Serres, *Le Mal propre: Polluer pour s'approprier?* (Paris: Éditions Le Pommier, 2008), 57-58. Translation mine.

⁶ Serres, *The Parasite*, 68.

⁷ Michel Serres, *L'Incandescent* (Paris: Éditions Le Pommier, 2003), 118, 119. All translations from *L'Incandescent* are my own. Cf. Michel Serres, *Rameaux* (Paris: Éditions Le Pommier, 2004), 85.

⁸ Serres, *L'Incandescent*, 118.

⁹ *Ibid.* Cf. Serres, *Rameaux*, 85.

¹⁰ Jean de La Fontaine, *Fables*, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), 118. Translation mine.

¹¹ Serres, *The Parasite*, 80.

¹² *Ibid.*, 89.

¹³ Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 60.

¹⁴ Michel Serres, *Hominescence* (Paris: Éditions Le Pommier, 2001), 244.

¹⁵ Michel Serres, *Atlas* (Paris: Éditions Julliard, 1994), 187. Translation mine.

¹⁶ Serres, *Hominescence*, 196, 197. Translation mine.

¹⁷ Serres, *L'Incandescent*, 40-41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 348.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²² Serres, *Rameaux*, 9-13.

²³ Serres, *L'Incandescent*, 113-114.

²⁴ Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser with William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 5-10; 30. Hereafter *Troubadour*.

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- ²⁵ Serres, *L'Incandescent*, 77-78; Michel Serres, *La Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Éditions Le Pommier, 2008), 164-166.
- ²⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Vol. II*, trans. R.D. Hicks (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1925), 65.
- ²⁷ Galatians 1:13-14.
- ²⁸ The most well-known example of Saul's persecution of the Christians was his participation in the stoning of St. Stephen, whom the Sanhedrin had found guilty of blasphemy. Acts 22:20.
- ²⁹ Galatians 3:28.
- ³⁰ I Corinthians 13:4-5; Serres, *Rameaux*, 95.
- ³¹ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 8.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 74-77.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 77-78.
- ³⁴ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 35-54.
- ³⁵ Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 98.
- ³⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism a Virtue?" in *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*, ed. Derek Matravers and Jon Pike (London: Routledge, 2003), 291.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 292.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 292.
- ³⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 149; xix.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 112-113.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 113.
- ⁴³ Serres, *La Guerre Mondiale*, 169.
- ⁴⁴ Serres, *Troubadour*, 9.
- ⁴⁵ Michel Serres, *Detachment*, trans. Genevieve James and Raymond Federman (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), 68.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.