Ethics for the Anthropocene: response to presentation – Dr. David Haberman department of religious studies, Indiana university

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David Haberman: 00:25

I'm David Haberman, a professor of religious studies at Indiana university. I'd like to first express my appreciation and admiration for Professor Jamieson's thought provoking book, Reason in a Dark Time. My initial read of the book was very rewarding, and I'm grateful for this opportunity to reflect briefly on his proposals for an ethic for the Anthropocene. I want to focus primarily on Professor Jamieson's introductory frame for considerations, for an ethic during this challenging time, in which he raises the issue of the attitude with which we do what we do. Acknowledging the world we now occupy will increasingly fail to resemble the one in which we had known. The real challenge we are told would be to find productive ways to live meaningfully in a world with nemesing human caused climate change. The greatest threat to any meaning, Professor Jamieson notes, is the notion, it doesn't matter what we do or what I do. (01:30) He asked a vital question, what makes life worth living? And also, how can we gracefully live while trying to preserve and restore what we can. In part his answer promotes particular dispositions, what he calls virtues. For virtues, according to him, give us the resiliency to live meaningful lives even when our actions are not reciprocated. An age old ethical question is, why should we do good, especially in a world where others might not, and in which the outcome is so uncertain? The reason Professor Jamieson tells us cannot ultimately be for the outcomes of our actions. For these will largely be unknown, considering the timescale of climate change. (02:19) I'm reminded of a testimony attributed to the eco theologian, Rosemary Ruether. She reports that when she gave talks about the environmental crisis and environmental activism, someone in the audience inevitably would ask her, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the outcome of the crisis? Do you think that we will make it? Or a time she chose not to answer such questions directly, for she came to recognize that they were typically designed to justify non-action. If she advocated pessimism, there would be no reason to try. And if she advocated optimism, there would be a little need to join in the efforts. Instead, she admitted that she was uncertain about the outcome. But in a sense, it didn't really matter anyway. Since what is most important in our work is living a life of love, no matter what the outcomes may be. (03:17) I appreciate the
way in which Professor Jamieson's views resonate with this approach. He promotes, quoting him, the priority of process over product, doing over what is done, and journey over destination. For those familiar, with the Bhagavad Gita, his also sounds a lot like karma yoga, that is performing a virtuous act without attachment to the results. In the end, isn't this one defines genuine love, anyway? Professor Jamieson maintains that life's is to be found in relationships with other animals, human and otherwise. And with the whole of nature. (03:59)

Our future is fraught with fragility and uncertainty, but I would contend that precisely because of this, there a special kind of love available to us these days. It was not that long ago that humans encountered the natural world as a robust other, but this is changing. When European settlers first came to the shores of this continent, they experienced the vast and unbroken forest as both powerful and frightening. The first order of business was to beat back the wilderness, cut the forest and carve a garden out of its remnants. Mission accomplished. Our remaining forests are now diminished and disease, and in need of tender attention and care. (04:42) There are two sides to love; joy and care. Love is what moves us to the tear of delight when we watch our child perform successfully on a stage. And love is what causes us to shed tears of concern when our child falls seriously ill. The world we live in today is vulnerable, indeed, but it is this vulnerability that offers this a profound opportunity for love. (05:08) The redeeming feature of this troubled age of mass extinction, the silver lining and the proverbial dark cloud of our times, is a love that is both extremely necessary and astonishingly sweet. This which we will allow us to stand courageously in the face of foreign and real challenges, is this love itself. A most powerful kind of love that cannot be defeated. For it is a love that has surrendered attachment to outcomes. (05:37) Professor Jamieson has given us a productive list of what he calls green virtues. And he devotes special attention, a whole section to the respect of nature, what he also calls love of nature. Fundamentally, this will involve reconfiguring our relationship with the non-human world. He affirms that are precursors for this in traditional wisdom, and notes its presence in indigenous peoples and various Asian traditions. I would agree with this wholeheartedly and the wonderful array of possible relationships we might have with it. (06:13) The only critical comment I have to offer Professor Jamieson is in response to a statement he makes in his book on page 200. He says, "We live in a post Nietzschean world in which the Gods are not available to give meaning to our lives." I wonder who this we refers to and question whether it includes all of humanity. I would suggest that one form of the
humility promoted in the book, my take is realizing that our theology too is limited or even stunted these days. And recognizing that there might be fruitful possibilities available to us in thinking with a vast range of religious traditions from different historical periods and other cultures. (06:57) As the eco psychologists, Ralph Metzner has argued quote, recognizing and respecting worldviews and spiritual practices different from our own is probably the best anecdote to the west fixation in the life destroying disassociation between spirit and nature, end quote. The final suggestion that I wanted to make is perhaps the gods still work, waiting to be rediscovered in the rivers, trees and mountains in forms unbeknownst to us at present.

Return to the web page for this video, “Ethics for the Anthropocene: response to presentation – Dr. David Haberman department of religious studies, Indiana university