

Environmental Governance and the Human Person

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Introduction

Ecological problems have grown in complexity and scale and with it either a desire for increased technical mastery and control on the one end or increased anxiety and despondency on the other. The discourses on how to respond are very diverse and polarized. Eco-modernists optimistically view planetary scale problems as a challenge to human knowledge and technology that can be overcome (Asafu-Adjaye et al, 2015). The Marxist-socialist critique of the capitalist market order views economic liberalism as the root cause of ecological problems and seeks a greater role for state and society. Others want to abandon such rational-technical responses and rather seek a retrieval of a pre-modern harmony with cosmologic and natural cycles (Berry, 1999). Another pre-modern movement suggests to reinterpret the truth, good and beautiful in an Aristotelian teleology that seeks true and good ends through an ethics of virtue (Long 2003; McIntyre, 1984).

This typology of responses to the ecological crises is far from comprehensive, but do indicate the wide variety on offer and the increasing probability of polarization. At stake is not only a difference on how to respond to a complex problem, but possibly another nail in the coffin of the Enlightenment project with its focus first on higher-order truth of reason and later on the concrete truths of historical and material progress. After the Second World War humankind started an unprecedented pursuit of individual expression, fulfillment and happiness as manifested in the liberal and global economic order, only seriously countered by a Marxist-socialist option of achieving happiness through the order of the state. Despite an emphasis on liberalism in the modern market order and the promises of utopian happiness by Marxist-social experiments, our current times have been characterized by a deficiency in what it means to be a human person (Taylor, 2007:291; Taylor 1989:508).

My suggestion in response to the ecological problems is to start asking the question again who *we* are as human persons. As humans we have created a problem on a planetary scale and as humans we have to learn what it means and how to respond wisely. The “great demotion” of human beings as being inconsequential within the vast scale of the cosmos needs to be reinterpreted as we “have to get to grips with our own significance” (Grinspoon, 2017:209). On the other hand, the great promotion of human beings as the rational, autonomous masters of the earth, have brought ecological destruction on a global scale. Neither the anthropologies of our great significance nor of our insignificance, would assist in wise decision-making and governance.

In this paper I will trace the importance of the retrieval of the human person in the field of environmental governance. The argument presented here is that it is futile to attempt environmental governance in the face of planetary scale ecological problems without an explicit place for personal human agency and lived experiences in relation to others. The paper concludes with some implications for human learning.

Environmental Governance

In the mid 20th century environmental problems were left to the state to deal with mainly through direct environmental regulations. With the increasing complexity and scale of environmental problems the institutional forms of environmental governance in the Western world broadened to include not only the state, but also markets and communities. The focus shifted towards “restructur[ing] agent-level incentives and attitudes towards the environment” and an acceptance of the “logic of efficiency” in achieving goals of environmental conservation and sustainable development (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006:311). State-directed control became enthusiastically replaced in the 1990s and 2000’s by partnerships between the state and market actors (public-private partnerships) or between market actors and communities (payments for ecosystem services) or between the state and communities (community based natural resource management). The 19th century optimistic dream that a state can govern with confidence by controlling a “universe of facts” has long dissipated and replaced with a focus on changing the behaviour of agents in markets in the name of “efficient global governance” (Mazower, 2012:427).

The idea of governance as outlined above is in a predicament. Fuelled by both the financial crises and intensification of the ecological crises on a global scale, modern economic liberalism is increasingly challenged by those who have not received the goods and by those who are on the receiving side of ecological destruction. Grandiose targets such as the Paris agreement go largely unmet, and between half to two-thirds of the (mainly) middle class Western population have just been treading water for a full generation already (Luce, 2018:13). States operating in the modern liberal economic order are not strong enough to meet the demand for public goods, such as environmental quality, education and health care.

With the rise of populism against the global economic order, the scientific (read environmental economic) approach to environmental governance is experienced as being under attack and framed as an ideological battle for environmental management (McCarthy, 2018). Tying responsible environmental governance to the universal acceptability of the modern economic order is a statement of faith in progress though. In fact, it is shortsighted not to look at the evidence of the changing world order and to discern what the effects on environmental governance will be. Although the mainstream economic approach to environmental management and policy has become accepted in the new green economy, a deeper critical reflection on the discipline has also emerged (De Wit, 2016). A discernable shift is taking place in economic thinking which has deep historical roots that has been perpetuated by the financial and ecological crises,

although the full effect on economic policy and practice still remains to be seen (De Wit, in process). It is more likely that the foreseeable future will be dominated by a clash between alternative visions on global order, and by implication the approaches taken to planetary-scale ecological problems. Much of contemporary politics and academic reflection on global political order include alternative ideas of the good or the truth, over and above the more familiar question on who will reap the benefits and who will pay the costs of socio-political and ecological transitions. In this clash of philosophies and the systems humans have created, attention to the human person, who is ultimately affected by social, political and economic change and ultimately in the position to respond to such changes - whether as individuals, or members of households, businesses, communities, cities, regions or nations -needs to remain a crucial focus of attention.

Although developments and debates on the global social and political order are important, they do tend to focus on what is defined at a global systems-level at the expense of the human person. For example, decisions in the modern economic order are reduced to that which is functional and instrumental and primarily focussed on what is perceived to be good for the individual self. Identity politics changes the focus to what is perceived to be good for communities or nations bound together by religion, race or social background at the exclusion of other persons. Marxist-socialist options subordinate the person to the good as perceived by society or by the state. A philosophy of ecological harmony subordinate human persons to what is perceived to be the natural and harmonious good of the cosmological or natural cycles. In the battle for supremacy of systems of ideas in the 21st century, the question who the human person is could easily be overlooked in formulating a response.

Placing human persons central in responding to planetary ecological problems can easily meet resistance from those positions that have diagnosed the free, individual consumer as the root cause of ecological problems in the first place. Such attacks are misdirected. The retrieval of personal human agency in environmental governance does not mean to endorse egoistic individual dominion and exploitation of the environment. Placing the human person central must also not be confused with the argument for the retrieval of individual liberalism as manifest in the modern liberal market order (De Wit, 2018; McMurray, 1969).

The Human Person

Many philosophers and theologians have attempted to answer the question who the human person is. I will only focus here on the contributions of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and the 20th century Scottish philosopher John Macmurray. In a rejection of any totality, the existential philosopher Kierkegaard was faced with the terrible prospect of the lone individual trembling with fear, ending life "shattered to pieces by the shock of eternity" (Caputo, 2013:196). He observed that people would rather submit to totality than to make hard choices between opposites in life that cannot be reconciled or reasonably synthesized. Nietzsche despised meekness and ended with a heroic individual with a "will to power",

with humans dominating their environment, rather than adapting to it (Caputo, 2013:184). Kierkegaard's anxious individual submits to the totality of the system to avoid loneliness, without an option towards finding fuller personhood in relation. Nietzsche's lone individual heroically faces the abyss facing her own self-destruction also without the consolation of relation. In the 19th and 20th century quest to understand the self, existential philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche embodied respectively a sickness to death and heroic self-destruction. What these two existential philosophers embodied was that there is literally no life in defining a lone individual as the self. In the mid 20th century after the shock of totalitarianism has sunken into the psyche of modernity, the philosopher John Macmurray (see also Martin Buber) came to conclusion that the form of the self is neither substance (mechanical), nor organism (biological), but a person. As Macmurray states, this came with two realizations: first, that the self was conceived not as a subject, but as an agent, and second, that the self could not be understood as an individual "I", but only in relation to others, the "you and I" (Macmurray, 1969:38). Human persons are not just thinking subjects, but are acting persons who find unity in relation to others. Action and thinking belong together; knowledge is gained in action and is not knowledge about an object (Macmurray, 1969:91). Furthermore, the self finds personal unity in relation to others, not to systems or orders that represent the world as a unitary process or system. Natural laws (esp. in economics and the social sciences) should always be qualified with the phrase "given that nothing else interferes", as interference does come from agents and their intentions.

Importance for human learning on complex problems

The view of the self as an agent and a person-in-relation has important implications for human learning in complex problems. First, learning is not done by a subject standing over and against the object where knowledge gained is seen as purely subjective or mental and without any causal effects on the object. Learning cognitively to deal with complex problems involves action in the real world. The person operates in the world and by doing so changes the world. There remains a place for subjective theoretical activity, but practical experience is what drives the questions theory seeks to answer (Macmurray, 1969:102).

Second, failure to act as a human person is primarily a condition of relational disorder. The maintenance and development of relationships counter the inertia of natural and social systems towards treating human persons ultimately as objects in pursuit of a greater ideal good of the system. A true awareness and knowledge of the other mitigates against such idealism (Macmurray, 1969:107). It is precisely in embodied actions of an agent upon others where knowledge is gained. One agent cannot prescribe or determine who the other is or to what idealized system the other should aspire or live up to, because the other is also an agent. Action leading to change is only really possible when the other is not reduced to a substance or organism, but allowed to be a true human person.

Conclusion

Change in the face of complex ecological problems at increasingly larger scales is possible and the future remains open to human learning and action. The concreteness of action in the real world ultimately comes from human persons, and not from the inevitability of historical progress or the universality of pure reason, or contained by so-called iron laws as observed in nature or in society. Human persons cannot resign to fate, but would need all the wisdom to .

Environmental governance has increasingly accepted the modern economic approach in the last few decades. The modern liberal order is now increasingly challenged worldwide. It has been argued here that for environmental governance to remain constructively engaged in such a changing world it will be fruitful to better understand the form of the personal. Real-world learning processes that aim to gain knowledge in action and is defined by fruitful personal relations would be a good start. If there is one thing that can be learned from the rise of populism is that the post-war social and moral order of liberal democracy and global economic order in the West is not guaranteed and that it should not be left to resolve itself in any form of idealism.

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