

ECOLOGICAL HUMANISM

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INTRODUCTION

The challenge of understanding human nature is one of the oldest intellectual challenges. Every culture, every religious tradition, every significant theory of politics, economics, education, psychology and biology, plays a part in illuminating one or more aspects of the human situation. In the face of these perspectives, we become aware of the complexity of human life and sensitive to the many different ways in which human potential can be realised and developed. We also become aware that humans have the potential not only for great good, but also great evil. They can show loyalty to high ideals but also succumb to dishonesty, bigotry and self-seeking.

Despite the complexity of the challenges it poses, the human situation is, in its central features, quite simple. Humans are biological beings, the products of evolutionary processes taking place over an immense span of time. We are also social beings, and different social settings provide alternative ways in which individuals can develop, grow and achieve the integrity of projects, character and behaviour which are distinctive of adult persons. But no individual could grow to adulthood without the protection and support of the social and cultural community; nor could we flourish except in the context of the many biological communities and ecosystems of which we are inescapably a part. Ultimately, the earth and all the communities it supports are the home in which human life is lived. The English word 'ecology', like the term 'economics', is derived from the Greek word 'oikos' (home). As ecology has developed from the pioneering work of 18th and 19th century biologists, we have come to learn a great deal about our planetary home and the wonderful chemical and nutrient cycles that tie together organisms of very different kinds. Darwin suggested that competition in nature was most pronounced between closely-related individuals or species, while dependency occurred most often between items remote on the scale of nature from each other. His suggestion has been amply confirmed by modern work in ecology that has revealed the subtle linkages in the cycling of chemical nutrients, like carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, etc., which are essential for the existence of life on earth.

In natural systems, chemical cycling is the main way in which nutrients become available, now to this, now to some other population of organisms. The waste of one population is a resource to another, and very little by way of nitrogen or phosphorus is normally lost from, or gained by, a system like a forest. But, thanks to human activities, many lake and forest systems are now being burdened by inputs of sulphur which exceed the tolerances of the systems. The activity responsible for this increase in sulphur burden is the widespread burning of fossil fuels in industry, in transport and in the home. The acid rain produced in the northern hemisphere is now widely recognised as a significant factor in environmental damage of all kinds.

Acid rain is just one of numerous environmental problems that have come to public attention in the last few years. Is it correct, however, to think of it as simply an 'environmental problem'? The slow warming of the earth's atmosphere - the greenhouse effect - may lead to a 40 % increase in hurricane strength within the next 50 years. "Hurricane Gilbert" may, in retrospect, seem somewhat mild. Continued deforestation in the Himalayas will further increase the vulnerability of Bangladesh to catastrophic flooding. The last large jungle on earth, the Amazon rainforest, may well disappear by the end of the present century, and with it will be destroyed not only the way of life of indigenous peoples, but also a large proportion of the world's animal species. By the end of the century, the seas will have far fewer fish and pollution is likely to have compromised the immune systems of other large marine creatures besides the common seal. By the year 2000 more people will be living in conditions of misery, vulnerable both to disease and to climatological calamities than ever before. Are these all simply environmental problems too, or is there, underlying them all, some deeper problem?

ECOLOGICAL HUMANISM

I think there probably is a deeper cause for our current environmental crisis. It can be expressed in various ways. However we describe it, the problem concerns our conception of ourselves as human beings and our role in the world. By and large, those groups and individuals who have had political and economic power in the present century have failed to understand that the potential for human growth and development involves an inescapable, biological dimension. They have adopted a kind of "tunnel vision" by which they have imagined that social and economic development is somehow separate from, and independent of, our natural context. They have thus misunderstood the very conditions that make human self-development possible. Their mistake has been as much philosophical as scientific. This mistake has been helped along by the adoption of economic theories that have also embodied at their very foundation a fundamental misconception of the human situation. If there is to be hope for human life in the next few hundred years, let alone the next millennium, it is necessary to re-establish the insights about human nature that were already familiar in the 18th century, although the roots of our present crisis can also be found in that century. The underlying insights can be updated to provide a new philosophy of the human being, given what we now know of our ecological situation. I

call this new philosophy "ecological humanism".

Ecological humanism is, in essence, a communitarian view. Human beings, it argues, pursue the developmental ideal of becoming fully integrated persons within community contexts. The communities involved are of two kinds. First, there are socio-cultural ones, providing institutions within which people can benefit from, and contribute to various activities. These range from activities associated with production and environmental transformation that provide food, shelter and various material goods on the one hand, to the possibilities of religious communion, sporting activities and artistic and cultural modes of expression that allow for the exploration of human consciousness and creativity on the other.

But all socio-cultural activity involves the background of natural surroundings of sea and lake, mountain and forest, desert and garden and all the multiplicity of terrestrial ecosystems. Humans are inextricably intertwined with other dimensions in ecological communities, and these are the second kind of context within which we have a place that offers us modes of expression and potential for exploring our own personhood.

It follows from the communitarian aspect of life, that human beings are not isolated beings. In particular, we can identify two important respects in which what we are is a function of our place in communities. At a basic, biological level, we are the result of evolutionary processes, processes which have given rise to beings with capacities for choice and deliberation that far exceed those of any other animal. Evolution has, in this way, been liberating, favouring the neural complexity that underpins our higher capacities. But it is hard to see how we can admire the human being in all its complexity, without also having some admiration for the process which produced it. Those religious traditions that tell creation stories enable us to think of humans as appearing by a separate creative act from those that produced our surroundings. But once we recognise the continuities between ourselves and other creatures, we can hardly value the human while devaluing all other life.

At a second socio-cultural level, we are marked by the society around us, and our moral and personal development is, at least to some extent, according to the agenda set by that society. At the level of our families, our relations with others impose the moral duties associated with parenthood, while in the workplace, we can be better or worse employees, managers or workmates. Each location in the web of social relations ties the individual at that location to others, and one's passage through various social institutions is a significant part of one's history. Each of us represents, as it were, a unique path through the society in which he or she lives. In this way, each of us, while being historically individual and unique, also embodies community projects, community values and community ideals.

Some people, reflecting on these issues, may see only limitations in our natural and social setting. We can, of course, reflect on what we might have been, "if only things had been different, if only we had been born at a different time, if only our education or family circumstances had been different, if only we had lived in another place..." and so on. Social conditions not only define possibilities for individual development, but they are also subject to change under the impact of individuals whose lives involve these conditions. This is clear in the longest-lived social institutions we have, such as the organised churches in the Christian countries. There is nothing static about the history of organised religion; rather, the established churches have found themselves changing under the impact of individual challenge, as well as by their collisions with other groups and institutions in society.

The dynamics of socio-cultural life in some way parallel the dynamics of nature. Historically, individual populations have become adapted to various environments, while yet these environments have undergone change in response to the arrival of new populations or modifications in existing ones. The relation of living populations to their abiotic surroundings may also be less passive than was thought in the 19th century. Some biologists now believe that systems of living things are capable of resisting some changes in their abiotic surroundings, and of modifying - to a degree - their surroundings in order to keep life alive. This, if true, may be connected in important ways to biological diversity.

The parallels between the natural and socio-cultural contexts in which we live suggest a further important point. Whereas most living things merely respond to the challenges of their surroundings by virtue of their innate, naturally selected traits and dispositions, humans occupy a realm in which such responses can be debated. Humans are moved by considerations of value, of what ought and ought not to be done, while, as far as we know, there are no other animals thus constrained. Beavers can easily flood whole valleys, by their feats of engineering just as humans can. Only the humans can discuss whether they ought to be building a dam, or clear-felling a slope. Since our lives are community-lives, our ethical considerations are also context-sensitive.

As some optimistic thinkers of the 18th century held, it would be fine if there was a general agreement between individual self-interest and the good of society. It is not as simple as this, and unlikely ever to be so. Nonetheless, the institutional frameworks available to us provide all ranges of possibilities for action that is at once self-developing and of value to the groups within which we operate. There is no reason to believe, as some 18th century thinkers did, that essentially selfish action by individuals operating according to their own preferences will automatically be for the good of society. On the contrary, this particular thought is the root of many of our current problems.

ECONOMICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL THINKING

The substantial points of ecological humanism are, first, that the human being is inextricably bound up with nature and, second, that scientific

ecology gives us the information we need to plot sensible policies in local and global political and economic life. It does not recommend a widespread return to rural lifestyles, nor does it seek to criticise the use of political, economic and other models of human behaviour. What it does criticise is the neglect of ecological insight that has gone on so far. This neglect has been particularly damaging in the absence of other perspectives that might have provided a check on environmental destruction and degradation. However, once we adopt the communitarian stance of ecology, seeing human beings as at once members of local and global ecological communities and also responsible for the management of such communities, then we will have to take account of our interactions with nature in our economic and social planning. The communitarian stance involves more than just recognition that sustainable industrial and agricultural practices are needed in order to sustain human life. Since we are all marked by our environment and reliant on it for our most basic characteristics, a care for that environment is no more than an extension of a care for ourselves.

Where we have lost our way in the world is that we have come to ignore the fact that everything we do involves our relatedness with our biotic and abiotic surroundings. Like Sartre's self-deceived subjects, we have lost the ability to focus on that aspect of our lives. Classical economics must accept some portion of the blame for this state of affairs, for it gave legitimacy to the claim that human society could be best conceived as a grouping of individually selfish individuals whose pursuit of their own preferences would be mediated by an economic market governed by the invisible hand. Neo-classical economists have still not shaken off the notion that economic behaviour should be thought of primarily in terms of communication among essentially isolated individuals. If the individual is to be taken as isolated from society for the purposes of economic analysis, then the picture of society as a community whose own organisation is reflected in individual possibilities of development is lost. Thus, neo-classical and classical economics are generally hostile to ecological or communitarian perspectives. These particular economic frameworks have contributed to the possibilities of self-deception and rationalisation both for individuals and institutions.

On standard classical and neo-classical approaches consumers are able to set their own preferences. Some economists consider this to be a "democratic" aspect of their science. Independent consumers, equipped with preferences, make decisions on how to spend their money given the product information available to them. In this orthodox picture, it is possible to introduce devices for ameliorating environmental degradation. Aerosols in the UK have recently started to be labelled according to whether they are 'ozone friendly' or not. We could imagine wood products being labelled according to whether they are 'rainforest friendly'. If government intervention is permitted, then market mechanisms can be deliberately modified.

The basic picture provided by economics is wrong to start with, and we are left tinkering with a flawed product. The very "democracy" of economic theory is its undoing. For we use economic methods in our valuation of various courses of action and imagine that the methods themselves are value-free. For example, in discussing external costs, we may argue about how large a monetary value to place on an undisturbed wilderness area, or how to reckon the costs of some pollution. We know that these decisions involve value judgements about which it is possible to have real disagreement. It is reassuring to reflect that the methods of cost-benefit analysis are value-free and not something over which we could rationally disagree. I want to suggest that the non-communitarian assumption that individuals are free in their selection of preferences and relatively independent is itself a kind of value basis for economic theory, and something about which we can rationally disagree.

The point can be made quite simply. On the Pareto Optimality Account, we are asked to imagine how market forces could lead to an ideal distribution of goods. A state of affairs is Pareto Optimal when it is not possible to make one individual better off according to his or her own preferences without making some other individual worse off according to that other person's own preferences. No economist would want to argue that in any real society market forces alone would lead to such an optimal situation. In certain imaginable situations, they would say, it is possible that market mechanisms alone would have just this outcome. Now the outcome, however ideal, is a sensible one; the reason for this is simply that any state short of Pareto Optimality would be one in which it is possible to realise more of some given individual's preferences without any adverse effects on other individuals, and that would not be an overall desirable state. It follows from these considerations, according to some contemporary accounts, that government intervention in markets is justified if there are currently impediments to the attaining of Pareto Optimality.

The valuational principle underlying the Pareto model is the one that individual preferences are to be used to determine what is good for society as a whole. Yet what such models ignore is the role of institutions within a society in setting the agenda for what individuals are able to prefer in the first place. For ecological humanists, as for anthropologists and sociologists, it is entirely unsurprising that people in one social or institutional context will look to certain kinds of fulfilment which are either not available, or regarded as far less desirable in other contexts. Undoubtedly, there is a kind of laissez faire liberalism underlying such economic models. But its adoption needs to be the matter of some moral debate. For communitarians, its adoption could not be justified.

I do not know how to engage in the technical work that would modify economic theory so that it can take account of the impact of the many on the one. I do not even know if classical economics is amenable to such revision. If we take seriously the ecological point that the individual is partly constituted by social and ecological roles, and so deny the independence of individuals from each other and from their context, then we will be wary of the simplifications introduced by classical economics. To be aware of the limitations of economic methods is an essential first step in overcoming our tunnel vision on environmental issues.

THE HUMAN PROJECT

Human beings are social animals living within biological systems. The biological facts of life are not so much constraints on our actions, but the conditions that make possible certain modes of creativity and freedom, which make projects possible, by individuals and societies, that may be for better or for worse. The musical conventions of harmony and structure of the classical period were not limitations on the creativity of Mozart; rather, they were the means whereby his genius was able to find expression. So too, the ecological humanist argues, it is with our natural and social surroundings. Of course we can test these conventions, and nature, like culture, is a dynamic matter; an interplay between the challenges of individuals and groups on the one side and wider communities on the other. Just as we must live our lives ultimately within some social context or other, so we must pursue individual and collective projects within a natural environment.

Since human beings are moral agents, with some capacity for choice, we are able to raise questions about the surroundings which set the agenda for human life. In particular, we can consider the attitude we should take to these. Ecological humanism argues that it is part of living well, of living a good human life that our attitude to the natural world in which such lives are led to one of respect, wonder and care. Such an attitude contrasts with one which thinks of nature in purely instrumental terms - as no more than our life-support system, or as a source of goods to be plundered at will.

Nature does provide our life-support system, and we are daily increasing the burdens its various systems have to bear. Even those who see no more in nature than resources for human society, are beginning to worry that we have gone too far in making the house uninhabitable, and think that we should be taking steps to limit the damage. But ecological humanism asks more than this. It asks for a new attitude of care and respect to inform all our individual and social dealings with nature. It asks us to show the same identification with nature that we show with our gardens, our homes, our villages, and even our material goods. Taken at the social level, this means that economic and political decisions should be answerable to a serious concern with the natural environment; a concern that grows from the recognition that we and it are deeply interdependent.

What we are, and what we ought to be, is a function of our location in socio-economic and environmental networks. In many societies today there is increased isolation of individuals from each other and from their wider contexts. This alienation from society is a matter of great concern. A similar alienation from nature is no less significant. Ecological humanism suggests that scientific ecology provides part of the antidote to this alienation. Learning that what we are, and that many of the significant properties we possess, are due to our nesting in particular ecosystems can bring about an awareness of our roles in natural communities and systems. Just as a fulfilling and good life requires a love and concern for some social values, values that society and culture produce, encourage and sustain, so ecological humanism argues that worthwhile living involves a care and concern for biological and ecological values.

We sometimes seek, either at an individual or a social level, to escape our responsibility for action by recourse to what Sartre labels "bad faith". Such bad faith, or self-deception, involves hiding certain aspects of situations from ourselves, using a kind of tunnel vision, or regarding certain issues or situations as being beyond our control, as being the "given" against which we can merely respond. To act with courage and freedom involves recognising this weakness to which we are all prone. The weakness is also present in various institutions and is displayed on occasion by those who speak for governments, companies, and other institutional entities. The owner of a factory ignores its pollution while concentrating on the wealth and jobs it creates. The pollution is taken as a "given", something over which it is not possible to exercise control.

Once we recognise the universal tendency to excuse ourselves and our institutions from real responsibility, we are left with two choices. Either to continue in bad faith, or try to take some genuine responsibility for our behaviour. The acceptance of responsibility will not always be accompanied by a change in behaviour - as Sartre himself noted. The ecological humanist would argue that, at least in some cases, our recognition of bad faith is likely to lead to a change in behaviour. We need not accept neo-classical economics as an ultimate authority on policy matters. We need not accept the displacement of peasant farmers from rich agricultural areas as a "given" when we discuss strategies for dealing with destruction of the tropical rain forests. We need not accept the current pricing conventions for meat products when discussing the contribution made to deforestation by European Community imports. We deceive ourselves seriously if we persist in our tunnel vision and fail to look at the full dimensions of our environmental problems in the face.

The communitarian perspectives in general threaten the freedom of humans to pursue their own goals and aims: such perspectives are thus undemocratic. No society believes in completely free, untutored human choice. At least part of what is intended by education is to put people in a position to acquire the culture, traditions and skills of their community and let them grasp the diversity of community values available to them in later development. Ecological humanists would argue that to overcome tunnel vision and bad faith, it is essential to include an ecological dimension in all education. Unless we and our institutions can escape tunnel vision and learn to value our place in nature as natural beings, there is little hope for the future of our kind or of the many other species on the planet whose continued existence depends on our current decisions.

Professor **Andrew Brennan** holds degrees in philosophy from the Universities of Saint Andrews, Calgary and Oxford. He joined the Stirling Philosophical Department in 1970, and since then has been a visiting fellow in philosophy at Princeton University and visiting Professor at Calgary. He presently edits the Scots Philosophical Monograph Series and the MacMillan Studies in Contemporary Philosophy. Analysis, Nus, Enquiry, Synthese, and other philosophical and educational journals, have featured his articles. Conditions of Identity and Thinking about

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