

8/12/2021

Social Justice/Eco-Justice: Thinking and Acting from Nature (Part II)

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These actually radical ideas, parallel those of the climate scientist Mike Hulme who argues that the climate change issue is the paradigm case through which a Latour-like approach can be pursued, since the Modernist approach and the technical solutions that it proposes are based on inadequate knowledge of the inherent unpredictability of large, complex and chaotic systems, like the weather. Hulme's radical approach is to suggest that traditional methods of analysis and "solutions" will only make matters worse, and that climate change is a symptom that "shows both the extent of our inadvertent and unwarranted agency, but also the limits of our science-saturated and spiritually-impoverished wisdom", such that rather than thinking in terms of 'humans solve climate change', we should rather think 'climate change solves humans':

We need to reveal the creative psychological, ethical, and spiritual work that climate change is doing for us. Understanding the ways in which climate change connects with foundational human instincts opens up possibilities for re-situating culture and the human spirit at the heart of our understanding of our changing climate. Rather than catalyzing disagreements about how, when and where to tackle climate change, the idea of climate change should be seen as an intellectual resource around which our collective and personal identities and projects can form and take shape.

We need not ask what we can do for climate change, but to ask what climate change can do for us.

This idea resonates with that of Ulrich Beck, who, in his last book (Beck 2016) argues for the idea of "emancipatory catastrophism" – that, as a chapter in his book is titled, "How Climate Change Might Save the World". This at first sight seems an odd and counter-intuitive idea, but it is worth pursuing Beck's claim a little further to see what he means by this idea.

He certainly does not mean that he is looking forward to a global catastrophe to finally shake us out of our slumber (or indeed as he stresses its alternative – the expectation of technological salvation), but rather that the climate crisis is posing questions and possibilities that might otherwise never have arisen (despite other major planetary problems as well as climate change). These include the opening up of fundamental political questions:

"Who speaks for 'the cosmos'? Who represents 'humanity'? Is it the state? The city? Civil society actors? Experts? 'Gaia'?" Here he to some extent echoes Hulme in asking 'What does climate change do to us, and how does it alter the order of society and politics', rather than what Maggs and Robinson call the 'Modernist' question of 'What can we do against climate change?'

Beck's answers are interesting and include: the need for a large scale politics of the planet itself, the possibility of new forms of cooperation and solidarity across borders, since faced with the immense problems that it generates, "climate change produces a basic sense of ethical and existential violation that creates new norms, laws, markets, technologies, understandings of the nation and the state, urban forms, and international cooperations". This in turn requires a 'declaration of interdependence' rather than of independence, and the substitution of 'methodological cosmopolitanism' for the outmoded notion of nationalism, since no nation can any longer go it alone. While climate pessimists see little but a coming apocalypse, realists – those who both grasp the scale of the problem and can see the creative possibilities that it suggests if we can but move beyond the modernist paradigm – can imagine what Beck calls future structures, norms and new beginnings. The basis of this is a version of Latour's 'flat ontology', notably that society and nature can no longer be seen as separate entities with little to do with each other, but are in reality deeply entwined, or 'entangled' to use Latour's terminology. This is not only a conceptual issue, but a profoundly empirical one, as coming droughts, wildfires, extreme rain, and unprecedentedly powerful storms will certainly verify, and these are not simply "natural" events but are both stimulated by

and profoundly impact, human society and its practices. What this suggests is not simply thinking *about* nature, but thinking *from* nature as the primary move in a new epistemology, and allowing this to radically influence our ontological hierarchies, or rather, to dissolve them. When taken seriously this has the consequence that all knowledge forms are equal (epistemological radicalism), but that forms not previously thought to be sources of knowledge at all (art, poetry, nature) become not marginal forms, but absolutely central our conception of the world and our place within it. Democracy and pluralism are not then political goals, but actual descriptions of the real character of life and the universe.

This has profound implications for our ideas of social justice, as we can now see justice as rooted in nature rather than in revelation. Or to put it a little differently, revelation is not so much new knowledge, as the awareness of the actual structure of the universe and the place of ethics within it: a liberating change of perspective. As in ancient Zen teachings, when we achieve enlightenment nothing actually changes, yet everything changes since we now see the actual nature of things, a nature that was hidden behind veils of ignorance, laziness and ideology. While we may not be able to exactly equate justice and ecology, their interpenetration is deep. There is nothing in nature that justifies gender inequality, let alone racism. Far from it, nature loves diversity. Even the apparent 'violence' of nature – species consuming other species – is disinterested: no animal kills another out of ideology, but purely out of their own intrinsic nature. Only humans kill out of pleasure, politics, fear or greed.

Action from the Ground of Nature

A painful paradox of the present moment is that we are not short of knowledge about such issues as climate change, yet fail to act on it. The scientific consensus is clear, but politics and economics lag far behind in their response. Most individuals, if diagnosed with a serious and potentially terminal illness unless remedy was swiftly and effectively sought, would indeed seek such aid. Collectively however, in the face of massive planetary problems, we have failed to do so. Equally worrying is the fact that the major spiritual traditions seem to be in the same situation: there is a lot of wisdom, but it somehow fails to convert into action: there is a surplus of the aspirational, but little effective practice. The church or temple-goer may drive to the place of worship in her SUV without seeing (or hearing about) any possible contradiction between professed beliefs and actual actions. This almost certainly does not reflect some deep-seated hypocrisy, but rather that the spiritual traditions themselves have not made the connection, and so do not teach it. It may also be the recognition, conscious or otherwise, that the old models of intervention, even if attempted, do not seem to work: we pray, sing, chant and meditate, but the world seems to rush on towards its destruction, violence and conflict persist and there is so much injustice in the world that it is effectively the norm. The re-discovery by many religious traditions of ecological themes in their scriptures and theology goes some way to bridging this gap, as does the rise of Earth-centered forms of spirituality outside of traditional religion. This suggests three things: the strengthening of ecological and social justice teachings within the mainstream religions, which still form the basis of the spiritual and ethical lives of many millions, by those who have the means to influence such things; the finding of common ground on which inter-religious and inter-ideological dialogue can fruitfully occur; and the creation of mechanisms through which positive thinking in these fields can be converted into action, not only in the small but important individual ways (recycling, saving energy, reducing waste and so on), but in larger structural ways as well, since it is at that structural level of politics and the economy that the planetary problems are largely generated and sustained. Ecology implies politics. At the moment there is a great deal of positive energy: writing, thinking, meetings, theologies, dialogues, teachings, but most of it, like the energy from the internal combustion engine, is lost as heat, and contributes little to the propulsion of the vehicle. In engineering terms, this is highly wasteful; in social and ecological terms it is a disaster.

We are already aware that ecology provides a ground of inter-religious dialogue. Here is a shared space that need not lead to doctrinal conflict. But dialogue without action, while comforting, is not transformative. Can we then look for ways in which that shared ground can become the basis for action? Here we can again invoke Bruno Latour, who, in a dialogue about the relationship between nature and religion suggests that there is a profound difference between seeing religion as a body of ideas about the world, and actually acting *religiously*: "Religion, as I take it here, is about radical conversion and transformation of the world. So it is new in that sense, a new way to get into the cosmological question". The Orthodox theologian Elizabeth Theokritoff, in the same volume, then suggests that, in Christian language of the "Fall" that "the fall is our failure to fulfil the potential given to us to transform the world into paradise through our relationship to its Creator". What forms might this transformative action take? It must clearly be based on the active pursuit of sustainability in all its dimensions, which, as suggested

above, requires new modes of being-in-the-world. The question then is fundamentally an ontological one: action means the transformation of Being into a form harmonious with the nature and evolutionary form of the larger cosmos. What might the elements of such a form of Being look like? Here are a few: the re-sacralization and re-enchantment of nature; the recognition that society and environment are aspects of one another and not separated spheres; the rejection of any form of economic activity that damages nature, promotes human alienation whether in the form of work practices or the promotion of addictions (excessive consumption, growth, pointless production or accumulation), or creates inequality or excessive concentration of capital or power; the acceptance in practice as well as in theory of “flat ontologies”; the incorporation into religious practice of the recognition that spirit and matter are not opposed, but that the material (including the human body and the bodies of other animals) are miraculous; and the recognition that diversity is the essence of life, whether this be reflected in biology, gender, culture, ethnicity, life-styles, architecture, or indeed perhaps in religion. I have always been charmed by the suggestion in Thomas More’s classic *Utopia* that perhaps the variety of religions is precisely because God likes to be approached in different ways, and is bored with the feuding over the idea that just one version embodies the truth, and that all the others are false or deviant.

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