



Redirecting affective dispositions: How philosophy can contribute to eco-political thinking

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The standard conception of the contribution philosophy can make towards understanding and redressing environmental crisis centres in the notion of environmental ethics: philosophy's central task is to explore whether, beyond whatever ethical obligation we might have to individual non-human animals, there is any further distinctively ethical obligation to 'natural' entities, such as rivers, mountains, species, eco-systems and so on. 'Shallow' ecology answers negatively, 'deep' ecology answers positively and so the battle lines are drawn for disputes about whether such entities as these can have so-called 'intrinsic value' and whether such 'intrinsic value' as there might be is genuinely ethical or merely aesthetic. A different way of giving a 'deep' ecological answer is to claim, in the manner of, say, ecofeminism, that we stand under a more-than-prudential requirement to care for such 'natural' entities because such 'entities' are constitutive of self-identity, that is, of who we understand ourselves most worthily and desirably to be.

Over the last thirty odd years diverse thinkers have attempted to provide an 'environmental ethics' as thus conceived. But the debate between 'shallow' and 'deep' ecology has subsided – perhaps with a win on points to the 'shallow' ecologist, but a rather unsatisfying one, given that the depth of affront felt by the 'deep' ecologist in the face of environmental destruction is left unexplained. Nor have efforts to uncover the ecological self succeeded. Many people do find their self-identity in the experience of wilderness. But many more, particularly those living in or near wilderness, or again, those living in poverty, either do not share this self-conception or cannot afford to do so. Accounts of the ecological self are rather too much like descriptions of one's preferred view of the world. In general, with the exception of Passmore's work on the concept of nature, the contribution made by mainstream Anglo-American or analytically oriented philosophy to ecopolitical thinking and practice has been lean.

Nor have traditions of so-called 'continental' philosophy fared any better.[1] Given its historical depth and breadth, this tradition seems to me to have greater potential to secure for philosophy a meaningful role in ecopolitical theory and practice. But this potential has not been realised. This is due, I think, to the post-structuralist turn taken by this tradition in the late seventies. This turn was defined by a no doubt healthy suspicion of the emancipatory rhetoric of traditional politics, which, whether mainstream democratic or more radically Marxist, had always displayed a distinctively modern confidence in the capacity of human politics, science and technology to order society in ever better ways. But the post-structuralist turn was also defined, less productively, by suspicion of the distinctively modernist belief in synchronic social structure, understood as a system of external constraints acting upon the wills, hence behavioural choices of individual agents, a system which, while it might presently constrain agents to make sub-optimal choices, could be understood and steered in ways which permitted better ones.



Suspicion of modernist political hubris led to a celebration and defence of the small, the local, the affective and the traditional against the larger socio-political, economic and cultural synchronically conceived systems of constraint within which they occur. Such systems were now seen as opaque, uncontrollable assemblies of forces acting in unpredictable ways upon individual agents. But then it becomes hard to see, much less address the task of capturing how small-scale, local practices, rich in affective and historical significance for their participants, interact with the wider systems of constraint within which they occur. If there is no coherent perspective on, because no synchronic structure to, these wider systems of external constraint, then one loses one's grip on the very idea of radically changing these wider wholes for the better. One can only ever act at the margins, in order to defend and extend micro-practices, perhaps in the hope that if these are preserved and replicated long enough, a tipping point will be reached at which a qualitative change in the whole occurs without the intercession of any 'revolutionary agent'.

Unsurprisingly, then, this kind of stance has had little to say about current environmental crisis and how it is to be addressed. In response to the crisis of river degradation and aquifer depletion caused by the current structure of Australian urban and rural water harvesting and consumption, it does not help much to get people to reflect on how the Hawkesbury River used to be, what it meant to them as children, etc., or again what their gardens currently mean to them, how sad they are to see their roses wilt in the drought and what laborious but also ingenious methods of DIY water reuse they are employing. This cultural studies perspective, at which Sydney Water, for example, has thrown some money, has yielded important information about how people attempt, at the local level, to deal with environmental crisis. Crucially, it has demonstrated just how willing and able people are to combine self-directed and altruistic motivations. This is clearly the kind of disposition and ability needed if there is to be lasting and significant behavioural change. But ultimately this perspective yields no particular insight at the general theoretical or practical level, hence cannot play any effective role in the development and critique of the kind of general social response required for resolving environmental crisis. And this is because it does not look in the right direction, namely, synchronically at the structure or system of production and consumption which constrains the wills of individual agents to make their more or less rational behavioural choices. That this is the root cause of environmental meltdown is, I think, conclusively shown by the momentous storms of environmental disaster gathering in India and China. So we need to be able to take a rather more modernist, structuralist approach to the political if environmental crisis is to be resolvable. We need to be able to understand synchronic systems and structures, and to re-structure them prospectively, in acts of general political and, I suspect, quite radical intervention.

How, then, are we to get beyond analytic reflection on the problems of environmental ethics and narrative description of fragmentary practices and traditions? A useful way into this problem – useful because it suggests a way out of this dilemma – is provided by the work of the English sociologist Elizabeth Shove.[2] Shove's important



accomplishment has been to focus attention away from conspicuous to inconspicuous consumption. From Critical Theory to Clive Hamilton there has been much criticism of those forms of consumption which are said to be ‘semiotically’ or identity driven.[3] It is argued that we are caught up in an environmentally destructive treadmill of production and consumption, because we are suffering from affluenza. We are too attached to ‘things’, the large off-road vehicle, the home cinema, the two-door internet refrigerator and the Grand Turbo home barbeque unit which, at several thousand dollars a piece, Clive Hamilton attacks as the epitome of modern consumerism. All in all, the environmentally and socially destructive forms of overconsumption are those in which we consume to flaunt our status or to purchase our identity.

Against this familiar view, Shove insists, rightly, I think, that the deep and intransigent problems of unsustainability lie at the level of everyday habitual consumption, the kind of consumption one can hardly get semiotically or existentially aroused about: the consumption of electricity and water, of milk and meat, Tip Top bread and Kellogs Cornflakes. In particular, she points to the affective drivers which shape such routine behaviours as washing, which, as it turns out, is highly materials and energy intensive. With improvements in the technology of washing, whether of oneself or one’s clothes, come changes in the behavioural practice. For example, with the introduction of washing machines and crucially also reticulated water, the washing day disappears, leading not only to large increases in water consumption but crucially also to a re-adjustment of what one regards as clean. These are now clothes washed once a day, indeed after one wearing only. This in turn permits the introduction of new technologies, e.g., fabrics which, given people’s olfactory sensibilities, genuinely require washing after one wear only, or dryers which permit quick drying under all weather conditions. All these little changes induce, over time, a tectonic shift in practices of washing, extending indeed to the very design and use of the items washed, the places wherein washing takes place and indeed the design of whole communities.

Crucially, in this evolution, the initial affectivities which ensure the success of technological change themselves change. It is, of course, extremely tiring and arduous to wash clothes by hand so the washing machine is received as rational lightening of the burden. But then what one once would not have perceived as inconvenient, i.e., devoting a whole day to washing, now becomes inconvenient. Two hundred years ago, people stank to high heaven and living conditions were unhygienic, so the introduction of reticulated water and in particular sewerage was life-saving. But notoriously, what the nose once barely noticed, it now viscerally reacts to as intolerably pungent. In all this, technology, affectivity and behaviour are co-evolving parts of the one behavioural practice centred on shifting notions of comfort, cleanliness and convenience.

Clearly, if the truly fundamental forms of destructive over-consumption are located in such routine behaviours, and if such behaviours are simply the living out of culturally evolving visceral sensibilities and tolerances, then re-directing things in a more sustainable direction will be very hard indeed. For on this picture this overconsumption is the result not primarily of the decisions one takes, but of how one is affectively attuned



and accustomed to react, quite unthinkingly, to things. Not just cognitive re-programming, but affective re-wiring, will be needed if more sustainable outcomes are to be achieved. Indeed, it is hard to see just what the re-ordering of everyday practices of washing would even look like if such practices are really so totally affectively sustained and driven, i.e., sustained and driven from within, by the constraints set upon behaviour by one's gut likes and dislikes.[4]

But just this indicates that the picture Shove paints of inconspicuous consumption is just a little too affectively driven, just a little too habitual and unreflective. It is not, after all, as if everyday washing were just mindless responding to internal sensibilities as to what is and is not comfortable, what is or is not clean, what is or is not convenient. It is actually not, or at least not always, the case that we these days wash clothes after one wearing only simply because we otherwise would feel uncomfortable or unclean. Similarly, it is not, or not always, true that we choose to drive simply because the car is just so incredibly convenient – so much so that if we did not have it, if we were restricted to public transport, we would feel as viscerally uncomfortable and constrained as we would if locked in a room against our will. Note that if one is tempted to think of our washing and driving behaviours as resulting by and large from such internal affective constraints – as resulting because, no matter what our intellect tells us, we just do not feel clean, comfortable and unhassled unless we behave in these ways – then one will be inclined, as Shove appears to be, to construe these affectivities as 'constructed', that is, as merely culturally shaped artifices of the practices they support.

But we do not respond solely to our affectivities, nor are our affectivities solely constructed. Very often, we do not act out of these affectivities, but because we recognise our wills to be externally constrained by various systemic or structural factors to engage in these activities. Those in business know very well how important it is to change at least the shirt and tie, if not the suit, everyday. This has nothing to do with how they feel about themselves, or indeed with how they know the people with whom they will deal to feel about them (for these others may agree that it is silly to wear a new shirt everyday). Similarly, that the car should be standing ready for use in the drive is not always the result of a felt need for freedom to move whither and whenever one wants. Rather, it is frequently the result imposed upon one's will by certain structural or systemic features of everyday life.

The practices of inconspicuous consumption which Shove rightly identifies as the principal sources of unsustainability thus necessarily intersect with wider systems or structures of external constraint. Crucially, they intersect in and through the individual agent, who is not just affectively disposed to behave in this way rather than that, but is very regularly able to distance itself from its affectivities when larger issues and common sense prevail.[5] And of course when commonsense does prevail, an opening is created for those processes of normalisation in which affectivity is re-jigged in the emergence of new behavioural practices. So this capacity to distance oneself, to master from within how one responds to one's sensibilities, is itself essential to explaining what Shove



rightly brings to the forefront, namely, the technologically enabled and culturally conditioned character of our affectivities.

At this point, however, a crucial and clearly philosophical task comes into view: the task of providing a general account of the self, understood both as something which responds, more or less rationally to the constraints put upon it by social structure; and as something which responds to the world on the basis of how it is affected, as when people who have been reared in constant temperature environments quite genuinely find even slight temperature variations intolerable and so instinctively turn either the heating or the air-conditioning on. Crucially, this latter point implies the need to move beyond pictures of the self simply as calculating over preference strengths and the like. For however much a capacity for such deliberation might be a part of selfhood, we learn from Shove that the bearer of this capacity is also always something caught up in behavioural practices sustained by technologically enabled and culturally shaped dispositions to tolerate some things and not others. Such dispositions to tolerate are not themselves preferences for this over that, at least in any sense of the term ‘preference’ which would permit one to speak of calculating over or summing up the strengths of preferences. Affective dispositions to behave are precisely not items over which one can calculate, nor does one typically reflect on them. Rather, one simply responds behaviourally to them. Nor should one use the weasel word ‘preference’ as cover for illicitly assimilating them to desires. Affective dispositions are not desires but rather what underpins and makes possible both the possession and the attribution of desire – as is shown, incidentally, by Anscombe’s amusing example of how we deal with the apparent request for a saucer of mud.

Now the need to move beyond this picture of the self only becomes more pressing if we acknowledge more strongly than Shove that the self which participates in everyday practices of inconspicuous consumption can stand back from how it is constitutionally disposed to respond to the world, that is, to thwart or redirect the impulses to behave towards which it is affectively inclined. The person who is not affectively disposed to feel clean and comfortable only if they wear a fresh shirt and tie everyday nonetheless goes along with this social practice because they recognise the normative and axiological significance attaching to this behaviour: it demonstrates one’s acknowledgement of others as to be taken seriously and respected in one’s dealing with them, just as it demonstrates that one similarly deserves such acknowledgement. Thereby they exhibit a feature which is, I believe, although I cannot argue for it here, firstly, a necessary feature of self-conscious selfhood; and secondly, the key to understanding why the task of affective re-wiring is not quite so daunting as it looks on Shove’s picture. This is the character of any self as inherently oriented towards a conception of what it is for it itself to live well.

By this, I do not mean simply a conception of the good life in general, but rather a conception each subject has of what one might call the highest good it has ‘chosen’ specifically for it: that felicitous state in which the subject actually is the person it believes to be worth being – worth being in that it does not suffer unbearable hardship but enjoys a satisfactory or sufficient degree of ease and pleasure; but also worth being in



that it exemplifies certain values and adheres to certain norms to which the subject subscribes. It seems to me that all non-psychopathic selves are structurally defined by an orientation towards such a conception.[6]

This has three important consequences: firstly, it entails that reflection on appropriate means to given ends only ever occurs as a proper part or dimension of practically oriented rational reflection, which now includes a quasi-experiential openness to refutation and revision by changed circumstances of one's conception of the life good for oneself. In this way, a capacity for rational revision, not just of means, but also of ends is accommodated, as a process in which that conception of who the self understands itself most worthily and desirably to be gets adapted to changing circumstance, in particular, changing environmental circumstance. And what guides this process is no high-blown notion of autonomy but merely optimal fit of the self with its world. Secondly, the idea implied by this of in part experientially induced reflective equilibrium – what one might call, following Aristotle *sophrosyne* – entails that this adaptation takes place across all three components – across what in the circumstances constitutes a sufficient degree of ease and pleasure as much as what the appropriate values and norms are. Thereby it accommodates the idea that one can change one's affectivity in a controlled, learning fashion. Thirdly, there is nothing essentially ecological about this self, nor indeed does this picture presuppose any normatively ethical claims about what norms and values there 'really' are. Rather, with Aristotle, it leaves this issue where it belongs, with the citizens of the polis.

I suggest that the elaboration of this conception of self, its transcendently philosophical defence as a condition of the possibility of self-consciousness and, most importantly, its empirical confirmation and use in the development of more sophisticated explanations of environmentally destructive behaviours and how they can be changed, constitutes one central contribution to environmental thinking philosophy can make right now.

Endnotes

[1] One exception is arguably Habermas, whose work has been mentioned to me by someone working at the Hawkesbury campus of University of Western Sydney as having influenced their work with Landcare groups. The Swiss engineer and planner Werner Ulrich has, I believe, also taken up themes from Critical Theory in what he calls critical systems theory.

[2] Elizabeth Shove *Comfort Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organisation of Normality* Oxford: Berg, 2003.

[3] Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough* Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005.



[4] Note that to say that these practices are driven from within is not to deny that there can be much external manipulation from outside, as when advertisers try to instil in housewives the feeling that their kitchens are not safe unless they wage ceaseless chemical war against ‘germs’

[5] For this reason, it is silly to complain about the ‘yuk’ factor as an insuperable obstacle to the introduction of indirect potable water re-use (or indeed to Australians’ ostensibly uniquely deep-seated love of the car); people can and regularly do stand back from their likes and dislikes, provided, of course, that they are not bullied (as they were in Toowoomba, Queensland where a prominent real estate developer led a scare campaign running up to a referendum on introducing recycled water, resulting in defeat of the proposal, but have not been in Goulburn, NSW where there has been widespread public support).

[6] And I would argue that a self which, while knowing right from wrong, was unable to pride itself in doing right or feel guilt in doing wrong, is a parasitic phenomenon, i.e., only possible as an exception to the rule.

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