

Teaching an ecological world-orientation through teaching history

Arran Gare

Swinburne University, Melbourne, Australia

With global warming, the eco-catastrophe of which environmentalists have long warned is now imminent. Thinking the unthinkable, James Lovelock (2006, ch. 4) suggests that a runaway greenhouse effect will leave only a few hundred million people left alive at the end of the century. However, George Monbiot (2006) is optimistic. He argues that if we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions in rich countries by 90% we might avoid this calamity. So, how are people responding to this situation? Australia is an interesting case in point. Even without global warming Jared Diamond (2005, ch.13) classified Australia as one of two countries most likely to collapse due to environmental destruction. If, as Lovelock predicts, there is a runaway greenhouse effect, Australia will become uninhabitable. The human survivors of this calamity will be living close to the North Pole. It is not unlikely that most children born in Australia today will die a hideous death due to environmental destruction. Yet Australians produce more greenhouse gas emissions per head than any other country and are continuing to destroy their remaining rainforests. So what has been the response of Australians? Concern for the environment in Australia has been declining (Newton, 2006, p. 24). While there are a number of reasons for this, this response suggests that Australia's education system is so fundamentally flawed that Australia is now a country worth investigating to work out what all countries should avoid. At the same time, by revealing what to avoid, Australia could provide guidance on what kind of education is required to produce people with the virtues necessary to grapple effectively with global ecological problems.

If there is one word that sums up what is wrong with Australian education, it is 'nihilistic'. It imposes the doctrine that it is impossible to defend any values or any idea of the good life, and to even attempt to do so is oppressive. Not only does the Nietzschean question 'Why?' find no answer. Asking this question is severely discouraged. Anyone who poses such a question is suspected of suffering from bi-polar disorder, or even worse, of being boring. In the face of an educational system that has generated such a culture it is difficult to know where to start. However, it is possible to identify a number of layers by which this nihilism is imposed. To begin with the most superficial layer, nihilism is imposed through a fragmentation of knowledge. The young have been left without any context to understand anything, let alone pose questions about the meaning of life. This fragmentation is supported by 'political correctness' through which multiculturalism and correspondingly, the right of everyone to have their own values without other people questioning them, are defended, and all further discussion of the issue terminated. If there is further discussion, deconstructive strategies pouring scorn on any claims to superior values or knowledge are deployed to debunk high culture, that is, anything which is not instrumental knowledge or merely a form of entertainment. However, all this is only the most superficial level, and hides the acceptance of free market libertarianism of Milton Friedman, and more importantly, of Friedrich von Hayek.



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Free market libertarianism has been almost completely embraced not only by Australian politicians, but by the general population. Notions of social justice are no longer taken seriously and the sole value upheld is the right of everyone to buy and sell what they choose in the marketplace. With the market, no values are required apart from subjective preferences about what to buy and sell. Ultimately, all that is valued is consumption and the means to consume more. While these ideas are inculcated through neo-classical economics, the 'Gospel of Greed', which has taken the place of theology, this in turn presupposes a mix of logical empiricist epistemology and ontological reductionism. Not only is there no real community, there are no real people. What appear to be people are merely arrangements of matter organized to win out in the struggle for survival. The only knowledge that counts in such a world is knowledge of how to control, whether people or nature.

There are deeper levels of assumptions than these, however. And it is these that I want to focus upon. The first of these is that we are external to, and only externally related to, what we are striving to know. The second, closely associated with this, is that reality consists of objects with properties. On the basis of these assumption the goal of science is taken to be the identification of the fundamentally real objects which can explain all others, whether these fundamental objects be conceived as elementary particles, force fields or superstrings. It is these Hobbesian assumptions, accepted at a very deep level in people's whole mode of being, that leads them to accept that the only way to know the world is to enframe it to reveal how it can be controlled, that only subjective experience is of any value, and therefore that the ultimate freedom is the freedom to buy and sell in free markets according to one's subjective preferences.

It is in relation to these assumptions that we can appreciate the challenge of an ecological world-orientation. So, what is an ecological world-orientation? By this I do not mean teaching mainstream ecological theory. While some ecological theory has upheld a very radical revision of what is taken to be knowledge, like many sciences, ecology has also been contaminated with objectivist assumptions. Success is equated with enframing its object of study to reveal how to control it. By an ecological world-orientation I am suggesting an orientation that rejects these assumptions. That is, it is an approach which treats the world as self-organizing activities irreducible to their constituents and environments, while being dependent upon these in order to exist. It involves conceiving ourselves, including our efforts to know and understand the world, as within the world we are trying to understand, seeing our efforts to know and understand the world as part of the world's coming to understand itself, the beings and relations within it, and their significance. To conceive the world in this way is to go behind the subject-object dichotomy to grasp a more primordial level of processes of becoming from which subjects and objects co-emerge. It is to understand the world as a creative process of becoming within which we are semi-autonomous participants.

To uphold this world-orientation is to uphold a tradition of thought going back to Herder, Goethe, Schelling and von Humboldt, who in turn were reviving a tradition of thought going back to Anaximander. This tradition has provided a continuous challenge to the dominant mechanistic world-view and the one-sided idealistic reaction against this, since the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is a tradition that can make the emergence of life and mind from nature intelligible, and which provides the reorientation in thought required to conceive of eco-systems as simultaneously consisting of physical processes and increasingly complex forms of semiosis, including the forms of semiosis associated with human culture. As such, it upholds a conception of humans as essentially socio-cultural beings who can only develop as individuals through their relations to others as participants within communities. Upholding the goal of science as understanding rather than knowing, it also provides the basis for

overcoming the division between so-called 'facts' and 'values', between what 'is' and 'what ought to be', and revealing what is the good life. It overcomes nihilism (Gare, 1996).

While a major reason for teaching this world-orientation is that it is much more coherent and promising as a research program for comprehending the world in all its complex diversity than either any form of reductionist materialism or any form of idealism, what makes it imperative to reform education around this world-orientation is that the future of humanity now depends upon it. The problem is, how can it be done? It is here that the Australian experiment in nihilism is so valuable. By taking nihilism to its extreme conclusion, not just theoretically but practically, Australia has produced a generation of young people almost completely devoid of what in the past were regarded as essentially human characteristics. Samir Amin could have had these students in mind when he wrote:

There are no more individuals, neither men nor women. These beings – one does not know what to call them – are neither human nor animal, neither liberated nor alienated, neither conscious nor animated by false consciousness. They are perfectly plastic. Their nature is no longer determined by other men but by a perfect machine. ... These beings no longer speak – they have nothing to say, since they have nothing to think or feel. They no longer produce anything, neither objects nor emotions. No more art. No more anything. The electronic machine produces – the word itself has lost all meaning – everything, these being included (Amin, 1974, p.12).

Incurious, emotionally tepid, dull eyed, they flock to the business faculties to study marketing, a 'vocation' that promises the maximum economic returns for the minimum intellectual effort in a country not only threatened by world-wide over-consumption, but a country which has among the highest levels of personal debt and net-national debt in the world. Through contact with such people it is possible to see what is lacking, and the stages that such people would have to pass through to fully develop as people.

There would be no point in attempting to reveal to such people the possibility of a radically different way of understanding the world. Quite apart from the profound lack of interest in the possibility of this, and a disinclination to read or exert the intellectual effort required for such an endeavour, it is simply beyond their comprehension. As anyone who has much contact with young students will attest, with occasional exceptions their experience of the world is so fragmented and decontextualised that they are almost incapable of transcending their egocentric and present-centred perspectives to examine their own way of understanding the world. It is necessary to begin at a much more basic level.

A number of philosophers have argued that narratives or stories are more primordial than logical or mathematical thinking. Without narratives, the organization of these more abstract forms of thinking would be impossible (Gare, 2002). Young Australian students who have not developed the capacity to organize their experience of the world through stories, provide good empirical support for such claims. What we find in these students is a breakdown of the temporal organization of their lives. They manifest the postmodern state of consciousness described by Fredric Jameson where 'the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience...' (Jameson, 1991, p.26f.). It is stories, particularly historical narratives, which should be treated as the foundation of education to provide the means to combat this fragmentation.

What is the connection between narratives and an ecological world-orientation? I have suggested above that the two most basic assumptions of our culture that need questioning and

replacing are the externalist perspective associated with an objectivist theory of knowledge which accepts a sharp dichotomy between the objective world and subjectivity, and associated with this, the assumption that this objective world consists of objects with properties. The second of these assumptions is the more fundamental. Taking narratives seriously involves treating not objects and their properties but actions and processes as the basic reality. Stories are, as Aristotle pointed out, the mimesis of actions. These are always within the context of other actions and processes. Objects and their properties only have a place in narratives as context, support, instruments and obstacles to actions. Once actions and processes are privileged, it becomes possible to understand how subjects emerge in conjunction with objects as processes of becoming, confronting, using and striving to overcome resistances to their projects in their environment. Personal identity emerges as a form of narrative identity, a temporal coherence through change, quite different from the identity of objects (Ricoeur, 1991). It is possible to construct narratives with just one agent, so that all the world comes to be seen as objects in relation to his or her project or projects, but narratives lend themselves to polyphony, to acknowledging the different perspectives of different actors, sometimes in conflict, but often pursuing a common cause, and thereby achieving a collective identity in a 'we' relationship. A feature of polyphonic narratives is that different perspectives are brought into dialogue to contest each other, rather than accepting difference and relativism. So narratives not only integrate the future and the past in the present, but can provide a context for dialogue and unify individuals and groups as active agents. Such unity can be to different degrees, and is often associated with conflict as well as unity, and historical narratives are pre-eminently concerned with such complexity. That is, while our culture has tended to privilege monologic narratives of heroic individuals, narratives have the potential not only to enable us to understand multiplicities of co-becoming processes, but to analyse their coming into being and the different kinds of interactions between them.

To follow a story involves experiencing actors and their world from the inside, putting oneself in their place. This does not necessarily mean that one is included as part of the story one is telling, but stories lend themselves to including both the narrator and the receiver of stories as part of the story. This is clear in everyday life. While stories are the mimesis of actions, actions of any complexity involve telling stories, particularly where a number of people are involved (Carr, 1991). Any major project involving a large number of people can only be undertaken by the actors continually recounting and updating the story of their actions to themselves and to each other, in the process adjusting their understanding of the situation and the state of the ongoing action. It is because humans are able to do this that they can undertake projects transcending the lifetimes of individuals, such as building nations, comprehending the cosmos, or creating a just world-order. Such trans-generational projects clearly require the inclusion of new people into the story as participants, themselves able to participate in the process of updating and developing the story. Healthy projects involve questioning and debating the point of the project, of the way the situation is defined, of the goods the project is committed to realizing, which must be included in the history of the project. That is, through stories we can understand that even in the process of telling a story we are participants in the unfinished story we are telling. Stories lend themselves to an internal perspective on the world.

Stories for the most part recount human actions. However, with the development of history, historians have developed very complex forms of narrative that include the dynamics of the natural environment, and stories can be told about non-human actors, both living and non-living. Fernand Braudel (1980) developed a multi-levelled form of narrative which not only gives a place to everything from the enduring geographical conditions of social life and

the mental envelopes that dominate societies for centuries, to the very short term activities of everyday life. Braudel was also able to give a place to mathematical analysis of crystallized patterns within such history. In doing so he has shown how history can be extended to include the whole of nature, yet situate individuals as actors in their everyday lives within this history, a task which has been taken up by others (Berry and Swimmer, 1994). While Braudel has shown how mathematical modelling can be given a place within history, scientists are beginning to face up to the impossibility of a mathematical ‘theory of everything’ which could replace stories. Stuart Kauffman (2000), a leading complexity theorist, has argued that it is only through stories that we can grasp the ‘persistent becoming’ of the universe. That is, within science itself it is coming to be recognized that stories are more primordial and more general than mathematical models of reality.

In short, to overcome nihilism, to replace the fundamental assumptions that have engendered this nihilism and to develop an ecological world-orientation, historical narratives should be recognized as the foundation and core of education. Through these, pupils and students should be encouraged to see themselves as creative participants within the unfinished stories they are learning about, taking an internal perspective on these and seeing themselves as part of the world being described. By incorporating the whole of nature in these stories, they should be encouraged to see the world as consisting first and foremost of inter-related physical, biological, cultural and social processes of becoming. They should come to appreciate that they are participants in a very complex world of self-organizing processes which have formed and provide a home for them, while they themselves are constituents and part of the environment or home of other processes. By inducting them into a complex of stories of the becoming of nature and humanity, their societies and communities, as both receivers and producers of stories, they should come to accept their role as co-authors of the stories they are participating within, with a deep responsibility for the lives they lead, the communities of which they are part, and, ultimately, for the future of the world.

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Author

Arran Gare is Associate Professor in Philosophy and Cultural Inquiry at Swinburne University, Victoria, Australia. Email: agare@swin.edu.au

