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'Getting and Spending, We Lay Waste Our Powers': environmental education and the culture of the school

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ABSTRACT This article sketches some implications for education of interpreting a key orientating idea of environmental education – sustainability – as a receptive-responsive frame of mind. It argues that, so interpreted, sustainability has extensive implications for the life of schools as places of learning, particularly with regard to the implicit scientism that is detected as a continuing pervasive influence and that is understood as an expression of an underlying 'metaphysics of mastery' in respect of both the human and the natural world. This posture is criticised in terms of its enervating effect on the ability of individuals to engage with the school environment and its destructive effect on the milieu of the school. It concludes that a central ambition of environmental education must be to work towards a school culture that recognizes that non-instrumental caring is an authentic way of knowing and that celebrates poetic responsiveness as a fundamental condition of education.

Today, headline talk of the environment tends to foreground anxieties over the way that human behaviours are impacting on natural systems in a manner that threatens human well-being. The current and predicted consequences of unchecked climate change, pollution, resource depletion, species extinction and so forth forebode a world in which human life will become increasingly precarious – with all the social and cultural problems that that entails. It is understandable, then, that for many education about the environment assumes increasing importance in schools and that its focus is on understanding the environmental consequences of our behaviours and achieving changes to those behaviours whose consequences are seen to be deleterious. And of course, by 'behaviours' here is meant not simply how individuals do or do not recycle,

conserve energy, etc., but the general patterns of living that societies uphold, for example, how goods are produced, marketed, distributed and consumed. In this context 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' have become key orientating ideas, and frequently these are understood along the lines of the oft quoted Brundtland Commission (1987) definition: 'a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. It would seem to follow that, in traditional curriculum terms, an education to equip us to meet the challenges of environmental problems would be heavily based in the areas of science, geography and citizenship. And this is pretty much how things stand at present in terms of national education policy in England and Wales.

While by no means denying the seriousness of the challenges and the worth of some of the aspirations identified in the conventional approach sketched above, in this short article I would like to indicate arguments that suggest that this approach misses a central aspect of environmental education and in some respects stands in danger of exacerbating the situation that it aspires to redeem. I will begin with an observation on the influential notion of sustainable development cited in the previous paragraph. Clearly it is problematic in a number of ways. For example, what are the criteria of 'needs', and how should they be established across globally diverse cultures, stages of economic development and geographies, and across generations? But perhaps more centrally it is problematic for the highly anthropocentric stance that it underwrites, the form of modernist Enlightenment humanism that it expresses. While in a number of ways liberating, the aspiration of humankind to establish its authority by asserting its (rational) will – seeking mastery over its own destiny – leads to an elevation of utilitarian precepts that essentially reveal the world exclusively as a resource. Many argue that it is precisely this exploitative stance that has led to our current environmental predicament. This outlook that is explicit in the ascendency of modern experimental science and technology, can be no less in play in areas of life ostensibly different in character such as politics and social relationships. That is to say technicism and scientism have become ever present dangers. For example, under the influence of fully justified fears concerning climate change and the consequent pressures to 'listen to the scientists', we must beware a drift into an insidiously authoritarian technocracy in which fundamental democratic values become highly attenuated.

With such issues either largely unresolved or unacknowledged under its aegis, and its frequent portrayal as a policy whose chief problems are of implementation rather than of meaning and motive, sustainable development as a guide to tangible policy is in severe danger both of intellectual bankruptcy, and of functioning chiefly rhetorically as a term of political manipulation (see, for example, Bonnett, 2004, Ch 9). This is not at all to deny that we need policies that address recognized threats such as climate change. But recognition of the veiling function of the term can invite an analysis that uncovers a deeper and more constructive meaning of sustainability. I suggest that one such more

constructive interpretation is that of sustainability understood not as a policy but as a frame of mind.

Notwithstanding the fact that in comparison with science and technology they are often regarded as 'frothy', largely it is poetry and the arts that give the underlying measure of how things are with us, and when it comes to apprehending the experienced reality of, say, nature – the occurring of natural things – it is far from clear that Einstein has as much to offer as Manley-Hopkins.

Iris Murdoch (1959) once observed that:

> Art and morals are, with certain provisos . . . one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality.

It seems to me that an open, non-instrumental, caring as itself a (creative) way of knowing is seminal when it comes to interpreting the meaning of sustainability – and that taken as a frame of mind it is far from being some optional Romantic anachronism, to be indulged, if at all, only as a holiday from the serious business of life. While at one level clearly representing a change of consciousness with respect to much of everyday life, at another it can be argued that consciousness itself involves precisely – and fundamentally – that openness, responsiveness and responsibility towards things that are the essence of sustainability construed as a frame of mind. An awareness of things themselves in their manifoldness and mystery, and our sense of the fittingness of the language that both facilitates and expresses this disclosure (*le mot juste*), lies at the heart of human consciousness. In constituting an apprehension of what *is*, relatively unsubverted by external instrumental motives, it constitutes an understanding of the world that is presupposed by all other forms of conscious engagement (Bonnett, 2004). Fundamentally, we live in a world in which things *are*. For example in our experience of the natural world things befall us as quintessentially independently present rather than, say, as social constructions. Hence this argument implies a sense of sustainability whose denial would involve alienation from our own essence and therefore from our own flourishing. Notwithstanding the undoubtedly protean nature of what it is to be human, for authentic human being, the attitude of sustainability is not a bolt-on option, but a necessity. It constitutes an element of our own good.

In sum, rather than seeking intellectually to possess and subdue, sustainability as a frame of mind would be characterized by a celebration of alterity (for example, of nature and its intrinsic value). Essentially it would consist in a poetic receptive-responsiveness that interprets sustaining as a letting things be as they are themselves – to safeguard, preserve, conserve – an 'affective agency' to be set alongside and to condition the 'effective agency' of self-regarding thought and action. Overall, the essence of this line of argument is that our environmental predicament is a crisis not simply of our physical

survival, but of our spiritual survival – that is, our felt understanding of what we are and how we should relate to the world around us, including our implicit ideas of flourishing. This is a crisis of our whole mode of sensibility. So essentially environmental education, properly speaking, is about the character of our relationship with the world – our way of being in the world – and this makes it relevant to the school in all its aspects, particularly the kind of place that it is. Recognition of this raises questions of the following kind: What ways of being does the school invite/offer to those who live in it? To what underlying motives with regard to the world does it reverberate?

One illustration of asking such questions is the attention drawn to the many levels at which schools as places can refute the anticipations (both conscious and tacit, cerebral and bodied – as when, for example, in sitting, our body anticipates the shape of the chair and that it will bear our weight) that a pupil brings, and through which he or she inheres in the world – that is to say, engages with their environment. Individuals, as ineluctably individuals-in-relationship, constantly operate in some locale and to a degree are claimed by the places in which they find themselves. When the refutation of pupils' anticipations by the school is extensive or radical this can lead to the pupil feeling 'out of place' and paralyzed (Bonnett, 2009). This alienation from their immediate environment brings an insularity such that one might say that they become 'unselved', and in any case it represents the antithesis of what environmental education must achieve. Hence schools need to consider in holistic terms the milieu of anticipations that they support and when disruption of those of incomers is edifying and when pathological. This illustration of environmental concern expressed at a local level suggests that if we move from a focus on sustainable development as a policy to sustainability as a frame of mind, it becomes clear that the culture of the school is at least as, if not more, important to environmental education than the taught curriculum.

Pursuing the above example a little further, a view of education once expressed by Hannah Arendt becomes relevant:

> Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from the ruin which, except from renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable.
> (Arendt, 1993, p. 196)

Arendt's ideas of the necessity of natality and new beginnings if culture is not to fall into ruin, and hence the school as place where pupils must be allowed to make their own new beginnings are highly significant in characterizing a school culture that would be consistent with nurturing the receptive-responsive frame of mind described above. Clearly, a school culture fixated on pre-specified learning outcomes and targets cannot accommodate this essential element of openness. It is one thing to present to pupils things regarded to be of educational importance and to encourage the kind of attentiveness that proper engagement requires. It is quite another to attempt to dictate in any wholesale

way how things should be construed and understood, or to imply that there is one standard and superior pathway for learning in an area of study. Detailed pre-specification (on the back of which often follows managerialism and modularisation) is the bane of genuine engagement with one's environment, which fundamentally is apprehended through the fluid sensing of an affective embodied self: sensuous, physically as well as intellectually active and engaging. The scientism implicit in much of school culture can have deleterious effects on the ability of pupils to inhere in the space that formal schooling provides. It seems to me that here we have an indication that in terms of an underlying frame of mind, the domination of nature and the domination of people are rooted in a common source: that of an (often implicit) aspiration for unbridled mastery. On the account of environmental education being developed here, it is overcoming the hegemony of this highly pervasive metaphysics of mastery that is of central concern. This implies that environmental education is as much for the school as for the pupil.

Of course, 'knocking' science is a well ploughed furrow. But this is far from my intention. Undoubtedly, science properly understood and properly located is immensely important environmentally. Indeed, we are now increasingly reliant on even its more speculative models (e.g., of climate change) in our need to anticipate consequences of both what has been set in train and what actions might be taken by way of amelioration. It is the insufficiently recognized and insidious effects of 'scientism' in the environment of the school that I attack: the specious objectivity conjured up by pre-specification, modularisation, and managerialism that of necessity inhibits creative openness. Environmental education as characterised in this article requires that we oppose the inherent intellectual possessiveness of the thinking that these expressions of overweening mastery encourage, and that sets the environment up as a resource to be acquired and used up, disposed of as we see fit in terms of our self-given interests. Here, indeed, we expend ourselves in ultimate futility: caught up in essentially circular efforts to manipulate, control, and consume, we dissipate our powers for receptiveness, responsiveness, and spontaneity – a mutually affirmative creativity that is to be distinguished from calculative ingenuity, and that through being open to what is gifted rather than demanded, can refresh and inspire.

In conclusion, with respect of environmental education, the culture of the school is pivotal: it conditions both the ways in which things are presented (including the formal curriculum) and the ways in which they are taken. The burden of this article is to suggest that the key aim of environmental education must be to establish a culture in which poetic openness in the sense sketched above can flourish. It is essential that environmental education invites a different way of being in the world to that which currently holds sway – one which celebrates a less anthropocentric, more holistic, impulse. Only when this becomes second nature can students exercise their powers in ways that sustain and nurture both themselves and their environment. Only then are they in a position to acquire and exercise the systemic wisdom in thought and action that

is desperately needed in addressing an environmental malaise that confronts us at so many levels and with such transgressive potential.

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