

PIED 3510 Global Political Theory and The
Environment

Question 3) Can human political concepts such as
justice be extended to the non-human world?

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Dominant human political concepts, in accordance to political structures, need radical ecocentric reconstruction for their meanings and praxis to extend to the non-human world. To begin with, the essay will sketch the political/ecological approach taken by the author, through defining anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, as well as outlining Meyer's (2001) dialectical environmental political theory. The essay will then provide an assessment of how the environment became political with a documentation of the long-tradition of intellectual thinking that constructed humans as the 'masters' of nature. Preceding this, there will be a critical discussion of several human political concepts and how their theoretical understandings, meanings and related praxis need to be re-defined for human relations to nature to be considered with political merit. To put some of the central themes discussed into a working example, the essay will utilise Murray Bookchin's work, with a consideration of Meyer's (2001) theorising, to illustrate the potential for structural transitions and self-development within an environmental political theory.

Firstly, the environmental perspective adopted by the author, to extend human political concepts to the non-human world, needs specifying. The essay supports Eckersley's (1992) argument for an ecocentric approach as opposed to an anthropocentric. Central to anthropocentric perspectives (in varying degrees) is the belief that humans are the privileged species who 'naturally' dominate nature. In contrast, ecocentrism concentrates upon the interrelationship between the organism and the environment, how this defines what they are, and how it is wrong to construct a dividing line ruling something as 'better' (i.e. humans).

Meyer's (2001) arguments against alternative 'world views' (such as ecocentric vs. anthropocentric) are of relevance here. However, it is better to see Meyer as complementary, instead of opposed, to ecocentrism when reformulating political concepts meanings and praxis. Specifically important is his argument that ecocentric analyses construct nature, through dualistic and derivative processes, as the source of social, political and economic order; ignoring the influence these orders have in mediating our view of nature through our interdependent relationship to the non-human world:

There is no space here for a discussion of either political ideas or structures as an influence upon the character of our relationship with the non-human world (p.37).

Thus, instead of constructing deterministic political concepts and consequential praxis where nature is attributed as the source of structures; power dynamics, place and experience should be central. The latter two are fundamental to his theory, as it focuses upon a range of places (from local cooperatives to the European Union) and how the dialectical relationship influences people's experiences (such as their relationship to nature). Furthermore, importantly, Meyer's theory is not designed for a specific type of government.

The subsequent historical discussion is important to consider when assessing why and how the environment became a political issue, as well as providing contextual understanding of the difficulties faced in extending political concepts to the non-human world due to the strong anthropocentric legacy.

Ponting (1991) documents this dominant strand of thought that throughout European history has constructed humans as 'superior' to nature with the strand taking

influence from Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome and the Jewish effect on the Christian Church. This argument was coherent up until around the 19th century, when Charles Darwin's scientific explorations of nature undermined God's supposed appropriation of humans as the rightful 'masters'. However, science *per se* was not the primal reason for the movement towards a different view of nature. Even with secularisation occurring since around the 16th century, a reductionist/mechanical scientific view typified by René Descartes - where the mind is separate from the body and nature - prevailed.

Ponting (1991) refers to how we have moved from a 'first great transition', which witnessed the start of agriculture and self-led communities, to the 'second great transition'; where fossil fuels use and industrialisation has increasingly intensified. In the context of these changes, Guha (2000) outlines two waves of environmentalism: the first saw environmental opposition constructed in response to industrialisation; whereas the second saw these intellectual musings developed and expressed by a political and social movement.

When assessing the development of the second wave, it is useful to consider Eckersley's (1992) writings regarding the formation of an environmental emancipatory critique. Eckersley states that in the 1960s, the focus was on environmental participation, whilst in the 1970s, with the 'limits to growth' argument; the problem of survival became the environmental preoccupation. Correspondingly, throughout the 1970s an authoritarian state model emerged, resulting in controversial policies such as immigration control (see Butler (2010) for a good contemporary example). In the 1980s, the environmental debates were framed culturally, as the emancipatory critique developed.

After assessing the historical context of environmental thought and its political development, it is essential to explore the corresponding progression of theoretical insights and the potential for extending political concepts to the non-human world. For this to happen, significant changes and sacrifices (job losses, for example) will have to occur. You only have to consider the recent uproar regarding Sheffield Forgemasters (see Forsyth 2010), after a government contract for nuclear energy development was cancelled, to understand the problems for environmentalists. This can prevent trade union support, as the environment becomes associated with the so-called 'new middle class' (Eckersley (1992); for a useful related discussion see Pepper (1986)). However, utilising Karl Marx's work, Burkett (1997) argues that, as there is a tension between the use and exchange values within capitalism, the working class struggle would benefit from adopting a pro-ecological emphasis on use values to develop collective expression, as well as environmental activism.

Meyer's dialectical work is also relevant when reconstructing these political concepts. As mentioned above, dialectical constructions of political concepts allow for non-deterministic meanings and praxis to reflect the relationships between nature conceptions and views of political, social and economic orders.

For example, an ecocentric reconstruction of the political concept justice, and related rights/ethics, needs to encourage the development of environmental ethics as a form of moral philosophy and undermine the dominant anthropocentric ethical theories (Callicott 1984). A practical expression of this is Polly Higgins' campaign for Ecocide to become a UN defined international crime against peace (Jowit 2010). Another example of Meyer's theory assisting the concept, justice, extension to the non-human world is the Environmental Justice Movement that emerged around 1970/80s in USA due to the uneven class, racial and power experiences of environmental

problems (Dobson 1998). However, whilst there is a focus on social structures as well as environmental consequences, the Environmental Justice Movement's dialectical ecocentric potential is undermined by an anthropocentric preoccupation with only *human* justice; which will fail to challenge the hegemonic constructions of environmental and social 'reality' (Pellow and Brulle 2005).

However, as Eckersley (1992) contemplates, maybe rights/ethics are impossible to provide the natural world, as it is hard to form a rights and obligation contractual agreement (but this can be said about infants, for example.) Regardless, such a change in ethical conception would help reduce environmental injustice – such as Saddam Hussein's drainage of the marshland in Southern Iraq, which destroyed the livelihood of the Marsh Arabs who lived in interdependence with the marsh (Schwabach 2004).

The second human political concept to consider is the state, especially relevant considering the increasingly globalisation. Hurrell (2006) refers to how the state has become a means of survival at the expense of the environment. The related unequal power relations between states need to be addressed by a reconstruction of the state's role for the non-human world. A possible partial solution is explored by Paehlke and Torgerson (1993), where they develop an environmental administrative state to counter the current conventional administration. The environmental state would have no compartmentalisation of the environment, as environmental aspects would run through all areas of governance. An environmentally popular slogan, "think globally, act locally", would be central; helping foster collective environmental engagement. This latter point would be assisted through citizen participation in decision-making, which could facilitate Meyer's emphasis upon place and experience.

Economic thinking is central to reconstructing the relationship between humans and nature (Ponting 1991). Ponting refers to classical economics' ignorance towards problems of resource depletion, as natural 'resources' were commoditised and the modern obsession with 'progress' was equated to economic growth. Thus, economic concepts, to be extended to the non-human world, need to be conceived in relation to zero-growth theory. This argues that the current focus on continuous economic expansion, typified by GDP, is not environmentally sustainable and is based upon a proliferation of exchange values at the expense of use values (Wall 2010a). Whilst Gorz (1980) criticises zero-growth for maintaining the depletion of scarce resources, Wall's (2010b) work on the commons and social sharing (another example of Meyer's place, influencing experience) would possibly allow for an equal distribution of use values, without requiring extra growth and continual use of scarce resources.

Another political concept that can be reformed and extended to the non-human world is democracy. Ball (2006) refers to how democracy, as we understand it, suffers from an environmental deficit. Ball constructs a new environmentally focused democracy, called 'biocracy', through widening the moral community to consider future generations' (human and non-human) interdependent interests by reformulating political institutions so humans represent these interests. For this, Ball illustrates how vital environmental education is for the public to learn about the ways nature communicates its interests. Again, a dialectical relationship between political institutions and natural conceptions would be essential for an ecological society to develop.

In addition, democracy is important to reformulate with close consideration of the concept, political representation. As Saward (2006) rightfully points out, we have a very narrow conception of representation, as it primarily associated with electoral

and parliamentary politics (arguably a viable criticism of Ball's analysis above). In fact, Saward can be complementary to Ball's analysis, as Saward refers to how a subject (such as political parties) should creatively and subjectively represent objects, such as nature's communications, so a cultural specific interpretation from the audience (electorate, for example) can take place. Relating to this, Saward refers to the need to construct new metaphors of nature to replace anthropocentric metaphors, such as nature as a machine. Whilst this would allow for a localised experience (again, paralleling Meyer's theory) with nature, emphasising human's representation of nature is arguably anthropocentric.

However, it is imperative to consider traditional parliamentary representation. For instance, enabling indigenous communities to take part in electoral politics helps with reconstructing politics ability to facilitate a holistic human to nature relationship. This type of representation could help in areas such as Peru, where the Peruvian president, Alan Garcia, is facing protests by the indigenous population against the proposed oil company 'investment' in the Amazon (Wall 2010b). Indigenous representation has happened in places such as Venezuela and Bolivia, with the latter having an indigenous president (Wall 2010b). Alternatively, indigenous representation can formulate in other ways such as through the autonomous communities created by the Zapatistas via apprehending land (Wall 2010b). Nevertheless, some indigenous populations are out of contact with 'traditional' political systems altogether.

Bookchin's ecoanarchist theoretical writings are important when considering how to reformulate political concepts to the non-human world. Furthermore, Bookchin's work is another example of how influential Meyer's (2001) dialectical theory of the environment and politics is (despite Meyer's critique of Bookchin). For example,

Bookchin's (1980) eco-communities (a replacement, instead of a reconstruction of the state) and decentralised self-managed units is an expression of Meyer's place. This type of local community sustainability can, for example, be found within China's Eco-Communities (Liu 2008). Bookchin's writings are also interesting to consider in relation to zero-growth theorists emphasis upon new forms of organisational arrangements (see Abdallah 2010). Furthermore, the idea that wilderness can be utilised as a form of creative expression (Oelschlaeger 1991) alongside Meyer's emphasis upon experience, shows parallels to Bookchin's (1980) view of ecology as a 'scientific art' that allows for diversity, spontaneity and unconscious self-development.

In conclusion, the essay has argued that reconstructing political concepts so they extend to the non-human world is important for influencing ecocentric politics. However, the historical development of the increasing politicisation of environmental thought demonstrates how hard it will be to reformulate human political concepts contra to the prevalent anthropocentric tradition. The complex and diverse views regarding the environment, and whether to take an ecocentric or anthropocentric (which also have many divisions) perspective, all interplay within different philosophical preferences for certain 'ideal' political, social and economic structures. Regardless, the essay has utilised Meyer's environmental political theory to complement an ecocentric approach, to illustrate the need for conceptions of nature to be seen as interplaying, through a dialectical fashion, with views regarding political, social and economic relations. Thus, the essay took several important political concepts and reconfigured them to have a new relationship with nature, but also, in regards to a new social, political and economic structural orientation. Bookchin's structural and value conceptions helped illustrate the demands upon a

new political theory. The essay has not argued there is an easy solution to the environmental crisis, but instead, has considered some alternative political arrangements and nature orientations so political concepts incorporate the importance of the non-human world.

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