

Counter the Dangers of Education

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I want to commend Paul Morgan for his timely paper, "Reconceiving the Foundations of Education: An Ecological Model." Through a careful appraisal of John Dewey's philosophical naturalism, Morgan rightly sees that the American educational systems have continued to reinforce a dualistic view of humanity and nature, which consequently endangers the fundamental purpose of education of "making the future social life possible." To counter this danger, Morgan proposes a conceptual paradigm shift to the ecological option. He suggests the "earth's-eye view" of history presented in Carolyn Merchant's work provides a unitary foundation of education and a methodological model of educational practice.

Since Morgan's paper is so clearly organized into two parts, first on Dewey's naturalistic philosophy, then on the ecological proposal for educational reform, in what follows I will simply trace this order to mainly amplify Morgan's argument made in each part.

Morgan has presented, I think, a fair case about the ecological element in Dewey's philosophical naturalism. Although there is no shortage of passages in Dewey's writing discussing how human experience is constituted by and understood through the complex and constant interactions with the objects in the non-human world, a genuine ecological thinking of philosophy must also address the question whether the natural world should be seen as, in Morgan's words, "primarily a source of problems to be overcome or an unruly force to be subdued." Dewey did not go that far. His concern with the non-human world is, for the most part, to serve the purpose of providing the beneficial *conditions* "necessary for the reproduction of a qualitative social life." It is the consequential human good, rather than the good of the non-human world, that is the main concern of Dewey's naturalistic philosophy. Within these anthropocentric boundaries, Dewey's naturalism does not offer an adequate theory of the non-human or physical nature.

In an essay published in 1940, "Nature in Experience," Dewey rebuked a similar criticism launched by his friend Morris Cohen, who argued that the anthropocentric characteristics of Dewey's account of the human-nature relationship prevented him from admitting propositions about such things as the origin of life on earth, or the events of geological ages of necessity.¹ Dewey's response is, briefly put, that 1) traits, qualities, and relations found in things experienced by humans and important for human sciences do not often appear in the objects of non-human sciences; 2) the split of the human and non-human world is a necessary and progressive outcome motivated by the desire for a better understanding of both philosophy and of the natural sciences; 3) the non-human (natural) world "constitutes the conditions upon which all the qualities and terminal values, the consummations, of experience, depend" hence, 4) those physical things are "the sole means that exist for control of values and qualities."² This response seems to support George Sessions's observation of Dewey, that although Dewey "claimed that humans were a part of

Nature... [He] still pictured humans as dominating the rest of Nature; as manipulating, controlling, or managing the biosphere."³ Indeed, Dewey was altogether silent about why the non-human world should be attended and cared about, nor did he address how the social problems in the human world have their roots in the non-human world. This neglect does not even escape those theorists who are willing to endorse Dewey as the pioneer of ecological thinking of education. Tom Colwell, for example, labels Dewey's thinking about nature as "pre-ecological." It is yet to be developed to become an ecological foundational theory of education.⁴

Perhaps part of the reason Dewey did not address enough the ecological concern in his philosophical naturalism is due to the influence by Lester Ward, a prominent social theorist whose idea of "telic progress" runs throughout Dewey's work.⁵ Ward distinguishes two types of evolution in biological sciences, the "genetic," a mere biological and unconscious evolution, from the "telic," a deliberate and conscious evolution. Applying the telic notion into the human world, Ward sees the telic progress for human beings as a planned, conscious, process, requiring the development and application of intelligence.⁶ In other words, human progress is, and ought to be, realized through the knowledgeable adaptation to the social environment with reflective intelligence. To do so, human beings must take advantage of opportunities available to them for improving their existence through means such as education. From Ward, Dewey draws scientific support for developing his philosophy for the critical thinking model of curriculum. Human-nature interactions are highly emphasized as necessary, but mainly for the human knowing of the world. Given Dewey's neglect of the autonomous and organic nature of the non-human world, and the impact of the human-nature interactions on attaining and sustaining nature, again, his status as an ecophilosopher of education may be questionable.

On the meaning of the ecological foundations of education, Morgan suggests a paradigm shift in educational thinking to a direction of "making the future social life possible." What exactly is the type of thinking that meets this criterion? In the past twenty some years, educational philosophers have given more attention to this topic, and the literature is growing. There are so far at least three identifiable treatments in education from an ecological perspective. The first is metaphorical, as used by John Goodlad in his proposal for systematic reform in education.⁷ According to Goodlad, we must understand that the school is too interdependent within its larger ecosystem to be a clearly identifiable self, so the ultimate measure for judging the health of the school is by how effectively it relates to the larger ecosystem. Goodlad's use of ecosystem here helps us to reflect on school culture as a self-renewable, attainable, and sustainable condition. Thus, the reform effort should be placed on creating and fostering such a condition. The second treatment of ecology in education reflects what is commonly called the "Green Earth" movement, which results in a variety of school projects, as Morgan exemplifies: tree planting, recycling, Earth Day cleanup — projects running, ironically, alongside the projects designed to increase the nation's competitiveness in the world economy, and which continue to exploit natural resources. The notion of "shallow ecology," with a main objective of reducing pollution and resource depletion,⁸ seems to be behind this

treatment. The third treatment finds its home in “deep ecology,” which maintains that what is really in need before real change can occur is a transformation in consciousness. Deep ecologists argue that “the anthropocentric core of mainstream Western philosophy must be overturned and replaced with a new metaphysics, psychology, ethics, and science.”⁹ Accordingly, an ecophilosophy of education, guided by the Unity view of human-nature relations, should become the new foundation upon which theories and practices are built.

Morgan’s proposal for ecological thinking and practice, although not specified in the terms used here, sees the ecological option as a “fundamental reintegration... that provides an opportunity to reconnect the seemingly separate items on the list of educational concerns.” His discussion on the interconnectedness of social issues to the health of the ecosystem, and his recommendation of using Carolyn Merchant’s method of history to reshape our understanding of the surrounding world, suggest that the new direction of educational thinking he is looking for is more in line with the ideas of deep ecology.

The problem with deep ecology, and thus with educational theories developed based on it, is that it is far from being unquestionable. There are many challenges raised by ecologists and philosophers alike from perspectives such as social ecology and ecofeminism. As Merchant points out, deep ecology’s efforts to place the blame for ecological deterioration on the domination of nature by human beings (anthropocentrism) meets resistance from critical theorists and Marxists who consider the domination of human beings historically and causally prior to the domination of nature. The resistance also comes from ecofeminists who see the domination of both nature and women by men as the root cause of the modern crisis.¹⁰ Both groups share with deep ecologists their general principles, including a recognition of the autonomy of non-human nature and ecological diversity. Both are critical of the potential problems within the views of deep ecologists, the problem of hierarchical differences among people of various racial, social, and political groups and the problem of environmental justice, to mention a couple. The ongoing debate on ecological theories is certainly healthy and much needed, but the implications for education become diverse and confusing. Whose ecology should be served as the foundation of education? What are the basic issues most deserving inclusion in the school curriculum? What does the ecology-based school life look like? What are the implications for teacher preparation?¹¹

No doubt, current mainstream educational practices dangerously undermine future communal life; it is even more dangerous, I think, if we continue refusing to admit to this wrong doing. We must counter these dangers. As David Orr says, “an increasing percentage of the human intelligence must attempt to undo a large part of what mere intellectual cleverness has done carelessly and greedily.”¹²

1. See John Dewey, *Philosophy of Education* (Ames: Littlefield, Adams, 1958), 193-210.

2. *Ibid.*, 200.

3. Quoted from Paul Morgan, “Reconceiving the Foundations of Education: An Ecological Model” in this volume.

4. Tom Colwell, "The Ecological Perspective in John Dewey's Philosophy of Education," *Educational Theory* 35, no. 3 (1985): 255-66.
5. See Lester F. Ward, *Dynamic Society* (New York: D. Appleton, 1883), and Laurel N. Tanner and Daniel Tanner, "Environmentalism in American Pedagogy: The Legacy of Lester Ward," *Teachers College Record* 88, no. 4 (1987): 537-47.
6. Laurel N. Tanner and Daniel Tanner, "Environmentalism in American Pedagogy," 540.
7. John Goodlad, *Facing the Future: Issues in Education and Schooling* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) and *The Ecology of School Renewal: Eighty-Sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
8. Arne Naess, "Deep Ecology," in *Ecology*, ed. Carolyn Merchant (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1994), 120-24.
9. Carolyn Merchant, "Introduction," in *Ecology*, 1-27.
10. Ibid.
11. For ecological schooling, see David Orr, "The Dangers of Education," in *Renewal of Meaning in Education: Responses to the Cultural and Ecological Crisis of Our Times*, ed. Ron Miller (Brandon, VT: Holistic Education Press, 1993), 25-37; C.A. Bowers and David J. Flinders, *Responsive Teaching: An Ecological Approach to Classroom Patterns of Language, Culture, and Thought* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990); and Madhu Suri Prakash, "Whose Ecological Perspective? Bring Ecology Down to Earth," in *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education*, ed. Wendy Kohli (New York: Routledge, 1995), 324-39.
12. David Orr, "The Dangers of Education," 26.