Thresh-hold/ Heidegger, Education and Ecology

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This thesis has a two pronged approach to philosophy, education and the environment: firstly I address the traditional philosophical question about the relationship between humanity and the environment; or subject and thing-in-itself; subject and object; mind and body; humanity and earth; and so forth, each philosophical discipline area has a subtly different set of terms and approach to the inevitable gap between the subjects' appropriation and interpretation of external things. Secondly, I want to argue that despite four thousand years of examining this arena, society and in particular globalised modern capitalism has dug itself into a corner such that the relationship between humanity and earth is dominated by consumerist utility. I want to argue that not only is it necessary to find a coherent route to cross the 'gap' between subjectivity and the earth, it must also be an ethical relationship which recognizes the ecological symbiosis of habitat and human animal. This requires a huge shift in consciousness for the capitalist world order. Thus, at the heart of my project is a political will to educate – to instigate or reinforce a paradigm shift that challenges people to look with fresh eyes at philosophy, at themselves and at the environment.

Heidegger argues in *Questions Concerning Technology* (1959) that far from a neutral 'tool', the technological relation to the world is producing, or constituting humanity in an almost irretrievable way. Echoing this apocalyptic argument 'alternative' ecophilosophies have entered mainstream thought as the implications and affects of mass species extinction and pollution refuse to be ignored. The relationship between environment and human subject can often be found in the technological assumptions about world resources. I would like to take a theoretical approach informed by Heidegger and Nietzsche and later post-structuralist theorists to reimagine the role education has in transforming cultural practices and ideas about subjectivity, technology and the environment.

Heidegger's theory is a very important and early analysis of the emerging environmental crisis and the role that technology plays in the relationship between humanity and our environment. He followed Nietzsche's critique of the way western philosophy has consistently instituted a separation from the solipsist subject, or 'mind' and the external object, or physical environment. This tradition of a harsh division between mind and body, or human subject and world has set up conditions for debasing the lived environment as a little appreciated temporary condition as opposed to the 'truer' more 'essential' realm of the mind or soul. The dualist oppositions have altered at varying points during the history of philosophy. When Platonism, and later, Christianity

dominated the field the earth was counterpointed to an abstract, Heavenly Ideal, outside of time and space, perfection and the 'Good' floating somewhere above the clouds. Nature versus culture.

Later, positivisim took its lead from Aristotle and searched for verifiable truth paradoxically situated not in the subject, but in the object. It was a search for minutely detailed generic categorization that could result in generalizations about the essential and universal nature of a specific thing or phenomenon. Again, individual cases or events never quite qualify because of specific historic anomalies, so it is only across time and space that statistical categorizations can be made. Positivism is always at one remove from the reality of any particular incident, urging progress to close in on the normalized goal. The affect of Platonic Idealisation and Aristotealean categorization on modern society is to alienate the environment from the perceived reality of human individuals.

Both Nietzsche and Heidegger renounced these ways of viewing the *Umwelt* (environmental surroundings) because they are nihilist and exploitative. The two of them had quite different ideas about the integration of humanity into the environment. For Nietzsche the body and mind were one entity. The mind can never fully comprehend the chaos of its phenomenological impressions of the environment. Any attempt is overwhelming, so a large proportion of the chaotic stimuli that the body and mind must cope with is suppressed and actively forgotten. From this premise the human agent is to a large degree absorbed into her or his surroundings without any overt separation. Furthermore, bodies are constantly touching surfaces, shedding skin, inhaling and exhaling, eating and excreting; at some level swapping physiological components with the environment. The notion that an individual is separate and differentiable from ecology is a convenient misapprehension that makes possible the social identity of the human genus. Taken to an extreme though, separation of individual subject from lived environment encourages an attitude and of lazy and irreverent exploitiveness that has proliferated throughout the modern world. It objectifies Nature as Other, alien, and exempts humanity from any responsibility towards the 'foreign body'.

Heidegger understands the relationship between humanity and the lived environment as inseparable through the integrally human factor of equipment. Coming from an almost anthropological viewpoint that humans are the tool wielding animal, he argues that human agency is completely absorbed in our understanding of our bodies and our surroundings as equipment. We enter an 'always-already' environment invested with signs. Many of this information is so familiar it becomes unnoticed, so that, for example, instead of viewing the chair as an alien object of metal and fibre, I automatically register it as comfortable and capable of taking my weight if I park my bottom on it. My physical demeanor, my activity, social assumptions and thinking is integral and reliant upon the chair-as-equipment. None of this is consciously registered, unless there is a problem with the equipment; the chair is lumpy or broken. Even in this circumstance, the desk, the carpet, the window, the small view, will remain unconsciously integral to the capacity, understanding and predictableness of my being-here, and enables the subject to promote or project a reliable future. The surroundings enable thinking and decision-making to take place. It is not possible to conceive of a subject without surroundings.

During the upheaval of the Second World War, Heidegger developed a more sinister approach to equipment or technology. He was appalled by the development of nuclear bombs and realized that technological developments made destroying the entire planet possible, for the first time. While equipment *integrated* humanity into the environment, it also governed human agency by defining the possible. He called this enframing. The danger is that when the process of absorption through technological equipment is so complete that the separation of the solipsist subject from the object is completely annihilated then agency is also annulled. At present the technological frame colours and totalises everything so that all objects, all eco-systems and all of humanity is a resource or potential resource in an all consuming ever-deepening process.

Economics and global capitalism is a process that reaches out and engulfs all nation states, and most regions of the world. The land (along with crops, humans and animals), the oceans (fish and carbon sink), the forests (as wood, pulp and 'planetary lung'), the mineral deposits, the fresh drinking water, the atmosphere and even the stratosphere is incorporated into a resource base for the ever-widening scope of the technological mode of being. Everything is increasingly gardened or managed.

The notion of the wild is so scarce it is getting lost from the language. Off the east coast of New Zealand, in the deepest oceans on the planet, plankton is being 'fed' bargeloads of iron filings to help feed the fish chain and redress some of the problems of over-fishing and species extinctions. An increase in plankton production also enables the ocean to operate better as a carbon sink and to absorb and compensate for some of the planets' temperature increase. The 'balance' of nature (if ever there was one) is being inextricably altered by technological use, particularly by carbon fuels. To avoid the ecology of the planet being altered so radically that most living species would be made extinct, including humanity, technological innovations will have to actively intervene and manufacture a normal range and status quo.

At a global level, the controversial Kyoto Protocol on acceptable levels of greenhouse gas emissions was one of the first things President George Bush objected to. The significance of his lack of co-operation has been one of the major concerns of amongst governments throughout the rest of the world.

The OECD spokesman for the environment, Simon Upton, is trying to use neoliberal theories to incorporate environmental factors into the global market. He is attempting to set commonly agreed measurements on 'normal' or acceptable levels of pollutants in the global commons: air, oceans, underground fresh water drinking tables,. Once measurements can be imposed it is possible to introduce exchangeable 'vouchers' that will bring pollution levels within the theoretical balancing rubric of the market's 'Invisible Hand'. Using the notion of Pareto Optimality, the market is thought to adjust to the most efficient exchange rate, taking into account availability, efficiency and price. Upton presumes that permissible levels of carbon monoxide emissions will find a price where they strike a balance between 'acceptable' levels of environmental pollution and the continued possibility for wealthy individuals (or nations) to continue to drive their

cars. The United States could buy vouchers from poorer nations that either do not produce their world share of greenhouse gas emissions (through poverty) and/or have natural resources that counterbalance the problem such as large forest 'reserves' that emit counter-pollutants, or oxygen. This effectively makes a situation where the richer countries in the world pay poorer countries not to cut down forests in an effort to 'sustain' healthy conditions in the atmospheric 'commons'.

The discourse of sustainability relies upon the notion that everything is measureable and that it is all a potential resource. No local community, let alone an individual has agency enough to alter the dominant paradigm of the enframing of technology. Through human policy making, increasingly on a global scale (and with little recourse to even a nod in the direction of democracy or community involvement) the technological frame is expanding its scope to include more and more regions of existence. Once atoms had been invented, technology made use of them, once wind patterns could be predicted, technology has converted it into power, once the oceans could be plumbed or the atmosphere penetrated, technology has found a utility factor and has continued to widen and better define the territories and spectrums of the resource unleashed.

The 'turn' in Heidegger's thinking about equipment and technology emerged in the 1930s during the term of National Socialist rise to power in Germany. The politics of the day and the somewhat romantic discourses that were circulating about technology and the Volk influenced Heidegger profoundly. For ten months in 1933 he enthusiastically engaged with the National Socialists seeking a new era that returned to home and hearth and rejected the terrors of the technological age. By the opening months of 1934, he realised that the Nazi's were intractable, and he gave up the idea of becoming the intellectual and spiritual leader of the promised Volk utopia. He spent the remaining years of the war giving lectures on Nietzsche and Hölderlin, trying to rescue their writing from Nazi interpretation.

But during this period, Heidegger developed his very important critique of modernity and the enframing of technology. The theory emerged partly from his reading of Nietzsche, partly from the Catholic suspicion of modernity, and partly from the volkist writings of two contemporaries; Karl Jünger and Spengler. In war like and masculinist language, these two writers developed a comprehensive analysis of the potential of the technological boom and a consequent critique of its effects of society and the planet. Their prescience is remarkable. Heidegger developed some of the ideas of both theorists into the concept of the enframing of technology.

Heidegger's theory is comprehensive. His interpretation of the traditional concerns of philosophy; that of the subject and object, or solipsist agent and the 'world' is reinvented in terms of *Dasein* and Being. This takes an Aristotlean lean on the notion of an essence that shows up in specific encounters between Dasein, or the subject and an object or event. As with most philosophers since Kant, Heidegger is immensely interested in time and its impact on subjectivity. He notes that the subject's finitude defines the manner in which we are 'thrown' into an already existent environment and confines the possibility for understanding the past and present, and for projecting into the future. Being *relies*

upon the active comprehension of *Dasein*, hence Heidegger remains firmly within the skeptical tradition of solipsism. The world only exists insofar as someone is capable of recognizing it. This means he excludes animals from the category of *Dasein* because they are incapable, he argues, of reflecting upon the world. They merely exist within their ecosphere without thinking about it.

Of course, in many ways, that is all that humans do within the work-world of equipment. We operate unconsciously taking for granted the already given names and utilities for most aspects of our immediate (and not so immediate) surroundings. Thought tends to come into play when an item is not operating as it ought to; and we must think about why, and how to resurrect it into the order of things. Perhaps the enframing of technology has only become obvious since it threatens the very continuation of life.

Heidegger sees the problem associated with the enframing of technology not simply as pollution, or species extinction and so forth, but as the forgetting of the meaning of Being itself. This attention and care that Dasein exhibits towards Being is the essence of human meaningfulness so forgetting Being is to annihilate the meaning of our existence. We become as important in the scheme of things as a rock, or a pasture.

For Heidegger, education takes its potency from reinvigorating the questions about Being. When he was Rector of Freiburg University, Heidegger wanted to restructure all the discipline areas along these lines. He despaired of the trajectory of science in particular, as merely collating more and more meaningless information and forgetting to approach and ask the crucial questions that define our humanness and the Being of our environment.

Nietzsche had, in my view, quite a different understanding of the relationship between humanity and the environment. Heidegger incorporated and developed many ideas that he gleaned from Nietzsche's writings, and they cohere in their scope and interests. But they have fundamentally different approaches to the fundamental philosophical questions, which leads them to develop radically different styles of writing, theories and conclusions. Heidegger rejected many elements of Nietzschean thought because of the way it was taken up by the Nazis and his four books on Nietzsche must be read with the political context in mind.

Where Heidegger concentrates on the flux of Being, Nietzsche talks about Life. Nietzsche's term life is not confined to a solipsistic world, revealed by human subjectivity. He incorporates organic and anorganic forms in a continuously changing flow that reminds me of the tenuous and changing set of relations and existences at work within an eco-system.

Both philosophers are interested in nihilism and its connection with the western traditions of philosophy and modernity. Their different conceptual bases offer subtly different explanations of the nature of nihilism. For Nietzsche the Will to nothingness is an idealistic and otherworldly rejection of the inherent value of life we lead in the here and now. For Heidegger it is the nothingness of forgetting to care and enquire into Being.

Heidegger's emphasis on the importance of *Dasein's* world view in relation to Being combined with the totalizing enframing of technology paints a dismal picture for the value of wild existence outside of the realms of human interference. Nietzsche's interest in the chaotic and unknowableness nature of the world opens up space for alternative possibilities, while acknowledging that in its present phase of nihilism, life is devalued to and beyond the point of extinctions. It is a precarious and precious thing and may disappear before we resurrect the respect and effort required to overcome the life-denying principles that dominate today.

The role of education as a 'State Apparatus' as Gramsci analyses it, is changing. Globalisation is injecting international clientel into many institutions. The deference, protection, funding and regulation that relates educational institutions to the particular nation state is transforming. Education still holds on desperately to meaningfulness by producing endless docile bodies that have 'skills' designed to transfer easily from one field of employment to another. Education has adapted admirably to its role in the era of transnational postmodernity, where the casualisation of labour has uprooted and made mobile employees on a new and enormous scale. Vocationalism is thoroughly embedded in schools, colleges and universities as their *reason d'être*. So what happens to education when society finally shifts the basis of meaning from 'growth' and conspicuous consumption towards a notion of environmental care? The superstructure of capitalist production as it was analysed by Marx will fundamentally shift. At the moment education is seen as the vulnerable appendage of a state apparatus, only existent on any national scale due to the Keynesian settlement. Neoliberal theories of minimalising the state tends to categorise education as the result of years of provider capture, where teachers have unethically expanded their clientel and their power base. The other utility of education is to protect property owning citizens by keeping poor and delinquent children off the streets. But the philosophy of environmental education offers a far more optimistic view of the role and position of education nationally and globally. Heidegger's emphasis on the meaningfulness of the relationship between *Dasein* and Being puts an entirely different weight on education. Nietzsche recontextualises humanity in terms of the anorganic life of the planet. Both these concepts disrupt economic growth and consumerism as the founding principle for organizing global society. Environmental education tends to slide at present, from an awareness and attempt to scientifically measure the deterioration of planetary conditions conducive to life, and a philosophical approach that opens radical new questions about the scope and role of humanity in relation to our surrounding universe. Education is a critically important site for these changes in attitude with the ensuing changes in societal structure to take place.