on_education
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reply: anthropocentrism, education and the (post-)anthropocene

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One of the greatest challenges – if not the greatest – facing humankind at the beginning of the 21st century is arguably the state of our planet and, coupled with this, our relationship with the natural environment. Most, if not all, other concerns – however significant – are necessarily secondary in this regard. The human impact on the environment has been, and continues to be, enormous. Human population growth and advances in technological ability and control continue producing previously non-existent environmental problems.

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One of the greatest challenges – if not *the* greatest – facing humankind at the beginning of the 21st century is arguably the state of our planet and, coupled with this, our relationship with the natural environment. Most, if not all, other concerns – however significant – are necessarily secondary in this regard. The human impact on the environment has been, and continues to be, enormous. Human population growth and advances in technological ability and control continue producing previously non-existent environmental problems. What is at stake here is nothing less than the survival of the Earth in its present state, as being inhabitable, and therefore also human survival itself. If this is correct, it follows that one of the greatest priorities – perhaps *the* greatest – of academic research, scientific, philosophical, educational and other, should be into how to arrest and possibly reverse the present decline. It is heartening, therefore, to find an international cast of eminent educational philosophers and theorists, scientists and sustainability activists contributing to this timely, all-important issue of *on_education*.

Education is a logically and practically primary, fertile terrain for the fundamental reconsideration of human-environment relationships, or at least so we would think. In reality, however, while education has led to increases in factual, cognitive awareness, changes in learners' and students' attitudes, behaviour and associated values have been fairly negligible, as Kai Niebert reports. In other instances education has also been the site of considerable neglect in this regard. For example, as Randall Curren and Ellen Metzger point out, there has been fairly little instruction in evolutionary science and climate change in U.S. schools (Brennan raises related concerns about both teacher education and schooling in Australia). Building on "growing agreement that schools should provide science-based instruction in at least some aspects of the realities of living in the Anthropocene" (something about which Niebert expresses some doubts: he sees science education at best as facilitating discussion), Curren and Metzger attempt to make a strong pragmatic case for an environmental education and instruction in the ethics of sustainability that are justifiable within a framework of Rawlsian liberal neutrality. While this move is likely to garner considerable assent, its

single greatest shortcoming is its anthropocentrism. The value of nature and the environment is largely (if not solely) instrumental, measured in terms of benefit accruing to present and future generations of human beings.

Michael Bonnett "raises the question of *ecological* justice in contradistinction to social justice as an important orientating principle in personal, social and moral education", a conception of justice that "questions the rampant 'human supremacism' that currently pervades our ideas of how the Earth's resources should be distributed, claiming that the needs of inhabitants of the natural world must be properly taken into account". Bonnett associates especially science and science education with a "metaphysics of mastery". Yet, he does not pursue the idea of an ontological and ethical parity of humanity and the rest of nature, plumbing instead for a "phenomenology of nature", the educational implications of which include (re-)sensitisation and regaining a sense of wonder. One wonders, however, whether and to what extent this will entail an understanding of the moral standing of nature and, crucially, decisively acting on such an understanding. Bonnett is not afraid to raise what many may regard as a politically contentious issue. It is not just a matter of our ecological "footprint", he says, but also of the number of feet that leave such prints behind. It follows that education for sustainability must also engage with the issue of responsible family planning. This idea is picked up in Lesley Le Grange's essay: "if we are to live hopefully, then education should entail experimenting with how to 'Make Kin Not Babies'".

Somewhat less promising is Marie Brennan's more or less explicit suggestion that "alternative knowledges, including those of Indigenous communities" be "used to address key societal and environmental issues". The notion of 'alternative knowledges' involves at best an incomplete, partial, and at worst a questionable understanding or conception of knowledge. It has a certain plausibility when it relates to practical knowledge and skills (knowledge-*how*) but none whatsoever when it is used to refer to the epistemologically relevant sense of factual, theoretical or propositional knowledge (i.e. knowledge-*that*) (see Horsthemke 2018, pp. 138,147, 194).

Niebert presents some interesting statistics but he provides little, if any, critical interrogation. It may be well the case that 93 % of German citizens "agree that nature must only be used in such a way that biodiversity is secured and that nature must be preserved for future generations" or that "two thirds of German citizens believe that politics must become more involved in environmental and climate protection" – but this does not prevent them from rushing to discount supermarkets to purchase cheap, mass-produced meat, dairy and other products that are not exactly animal- or environment-friendly. In other words, very few people put their money where their mouth is. Here, too, environmental awareness does not translate into an ethically sound, environmentally tenable lifestyle.

In their hard-hitting contribution, Hanno Su and Shia Su take on precisely the need to act. It is not enough, they argue, to prepare children for a future that may be no future at all, to 'educate' them, forcing our solutions on them without assuming responsibility now, presently, for the consequences of our collective actions by solving as much of the crisis as possible in our own lifetime. In other words, it is up to us, as parents and educators, to change our behaviour and our lifestyles: "The least – and maybe the best – educators today can do is to adopt a lifestyle for themselves that is *not adding* to the burden on future generations." Education, then, begins with us, with us as parents and educators changing ourselves and fixing as much as possible in our own lifetime.

A pervasive quibble would be that the notions of sustainability and sustainable development remain

uninterrogated in the majority of these essays. An initial concern is their inherent vagueness: 'sustainability' could be interpreted in economic, environmental, ecological and demographic terms, and also in terms of cultural, social and political status quo. Sustainability as such is not a value, or rather: is value-free, and does not contain in itself any reference to environmental ethics and values. It follows that what is considered 'sustainable' in terms of use or development differs widely, depending on whether it is examined from an ecological, economic, social or political perspective. An additional problem is that virtually any extant definition is clearly anthropocentric. Only the needs of humans (present and future) are mentioned, not the needs of non-human beings or the value of ecosystems and the environment. While 'sustainable development' and 'sustainable use' are arguably oxymorons, 'sustainability' might nonetheless be used as a benchmark, regarding our (human) impact on the planet – 'not taking out more than we put in', so to speak. This indicates a kind of banking model, and also shows what ultimately remains disturbing about environmental education, namely that it has little to say about the use and killing ('harvesting') of individuals – which may well be 'sustainable'. Even a more nuanced, ecocentric understanding of sustainability, which not only shifts the emphasis from the economic to the environmental but also explicitly includes non-human nature in its immediate sphere of concern, ultimately has little to say about instances of conflict between individuals, between groups or communities, and between individuals and 'the environment', and about how conflicts of interests ought to be resolved (see Horsthemke 2018, pp. 136, 141, 142).

Helena Pedersen and Barbara Pini (2017, p. 1053) pose a question that is of fundamental relevance in the present context: "What happens with education if it acknowledges that the world does not need humans, and is likely to thrive ignorant of human existence?" This tallies with Steven Best's contentions (2014, pp. 119 and 166, respectively) that, while earthworms, dung beetles, butterflies and bees are important to the integrity and diversity of nature, "human beings could be removed from earth ecosystems with positive effect", and that *homo sapiens* is "the one species the earth could well do without" (see also Horsthemke 2018, p. 184). Perhaps this indicates the true (even the sole defensible or useful) meaning of what Le Grange refers to as the *post*-Anthropocene: where a world is imagined in the absence of its most disruptive, aggressive and destructive species. In a sense, of course, acknowledging that "the world does not need humans, and is likely to thrive ignorant of human existence", would imply that the world is also likely to thrive ignorant of human education. As long as *homo sapiens* is around, however, education arguably continues to be a significant component of the struggle against disruption, aggression and destruction.

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