



Special Focus Section: The Philosophy of Organism and Climate Change

Introduction

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Process philosophers have at times found themselves on the margins of mainstream philosophical discussions. The field of environmental philosophy is not one of them. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that process scholars helped found the field.¹ Process scholars attended the first conference, published the first article in a mainstream ethics journal, contributed to the first anthology and to the initial issues of the first journal, wrote the first dissertation, and published the first monograph on environmental ethics.² Further, according to one prominent environmental philosopher, it is possible that Whitehead's work was an *ursprung* for Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which is itself often seen as a chief inspiration for what became environmental ethics (Hargrove 210).³ If we agree with J. Baird Callicott that Leopold is the "father" of environmental ethics,⁴ then it is possible that Whitehead is its "grandfather."

The significance of process thinking for environmental philosophy should perhaps not be surprising, given that a founding presupposition of the field has been the assumption that the root of our ecological crises is to be found in a problematic worldview that conceives of humans as fundamentally separate from the rest of the world, a world that is seen as valueless and meaningless apart from its ability to contribute to human life. According to this view, we can only successfully and truly address the

ecological crisis by developing a more adequate conceptual framework, one that recognizes that value extends beyond human beings and that properly conceives of human beings as a part of, not apart from, the wider community of life. Thus, much of early environmental philosophy was born out of the belief that a central task of much of environmental philosophy is, as J. Baird Callicott puts it, “worldview transformation” (516). With its rejection of the metaphysics of mechanism and dualism and recognition that each pulsing achievement of reality is the realization of value and beauty, it is perhaps no surprise that the philosophy of organism was appealing to some early environmental philosophers.

Though over the intervening half century precious little action has been taken to truly address our ecological crises, process philosophers continue to advocate for the value of the philosophy of organism in understanding and addressing the roots of the crisis. This Special Focus Section of *Process Studies* continues the work started by Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, and Susan Armstrong. The scholars here were provoked to answer the question: “How might the philosophy of organism help us understand and respond to global climate change?” As one contributor notes, “as we rush headlong into an ecocide that is also a suicide” (Rubel), the topic is timely and urgent.

In the first contribution, William Ilan Rubel returns to the central role of romantic poetry in process thought, asking and seeking to answer the questions: “Do we need a revival of poetry and philosophy? What role can the humanities play in averting ecocide?” Drawing insightfully from the poetry of Wordsworth and Blake, as well as contemporary thinkers such as Latour, Rubel gives voice to the poet’s and philosopher’s protest of “the violent circumscriptions of modern optics,” defending instead Whitehead’s appeal to romantic literature as a form of ethoecological or haptic attention.

The second essay, by Rev. Thomas G. Hermans-Webster, takes up the fundamental ecological act of eating as a context for making the argument that “meals are the imagination of the societies who eat them,” revealing the social structures and conceptual presuppositions regarding the relationship between the human and other-than-human. Drawing from and building on the work of the process theologian Theodore Walker, Jr., Hermans-Webster shows how “[p]rocess thought helps those of us who eat recognize the real influences that our meals bear upon the emerging world.”

In his essay “Whitehead, Sustainable Development, and Non-Anthropocentrism,” Keith Robinson provides a masterful review of the

shallow ecology that typically underlies ubiquitous discussions of sustainability and sustainable development. Harkening back to themes first defended by Susan Armstrong, Robinson contends that “[w]hat is needed are transformative ontological and ethical concepts that will open up new possibilities for thought and practice, providing a new basis for sustainable development.” Specifically, he defends the claim that Whitehead’s philosophy of organism provides the needed metaphysical basis for a genuine sustainable development. Many readers are likely to join Robinson in hoping that “[p]erhaps the future of sustainable development depends upon the extent to which it can be brought into closer proximity to a non-anthropocentric perspective of the kind that Whitehead develops.”

Juliet Bennett’s essay, “Static in Process: A Key to Applying Process Philosophy for Ecological Civilization,” rounds out the special issue with a compelling discussion of a novel methodological apparatus she calls the “static-process framework” comprised by five “basic orientations” of static and process thinking: “abstract and context; closed and open; isolating and relational; passive and generative; one-dimensional and multidimensional.” Bennett suggests how the framework may usefully be applied to many topics, including the climate crisis, and focuses particularly on the example of how the method can help connect economics and process metaphysics. The author makes a strong case for the view that a shift from static to process thinking is key to developing an ecological civilization.

As the contributions to this Special Focus Section show, process thought continues to have much to offer in understanding and responding to the ecological crisis.

NOTES

1. For a more complete presentation and defense of this claim, see Henning, Introduction.
2. Again, for each of these claims, see Henning, Introduction.
3. Hargrove is the founding editor of the field-defining journal *Environmental Ethics*.
4. “Partly because it is so new to Western philosophy (or at least heretofore only scarcely represented) *environmental ethics* has no precisely fixed conventional definition in glossaries of philosophical terminology. Aldo Leopold, however, is universally recognized as the father or founding genius of recent environmental ethics. His ‘land ethic’ has become a modern classic and may be treated as the standard example, the paradigm case, as it were, of what an environmental ethic is” (Callicott 311).

WORKS CITED

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