

About the Possibility of a Distant Future Ethics: The Motivation Problem

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Abstract

Our paper bears on the issue of the possibility conditions for another relationship towards nature which seems to be required if one wants to ensure a future to mankind on earth. In other words we both share the alarmists' views concerning the future of earth through climate change and other issues. We assume them as correct without discussing here.

Poltier's part is negative, claiming that liberalism is, from the point of view of this issue, a dead end; Hess' part will inquire the resources for designing another ethics through a critical discussion of Jonas' and Norton's contributions.

A. Liberalism, the ethics and politics of self-ownership – H. Poltier

1. Some quotes from the net

Let me begin by some quotes, gathered here and there on the net

1. by Deneen Borelli (<http://www.nationalcenter.org/P21NVBorelliClimate90108.html>)

“Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness - "unalienable rights" cited by our Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence - are now at risk as left-wing activists seek to curtail our liberties and personal choices to save the planet from supposedly man-made global warming. “

2. By Alex B. Berezow <http://www.ff.org/climate-change-isnt-worlds-biggest-problem/>

“Just a cursory glance around the world reveals that, given the enormous problems facing our planet, it would be surprising if climate change cracked a list of the top 10 immediate concerns. [...] As I discussed in my book *Science Left Behind*, the single biggest threat facing humanity is poverty.”

3. <http://www.cato.org/blog/best-government-action-climate-change-no-government-action-climate-change>

The Best Government Action on Climate Change Is No Government Action on Climate Change :
“[...] Obama’s] best response would be to get the federal government out of the energy market and allow it to flourish as it may. The inconvenient truth is that the U.S. influence on global climate is rapidly diminishing as greenhouse gas emissions from the rest of the world rapidly expand. As a consequence, whether or not the United States reduces its emissions at all is immaterial to the path of future climate change and its impacts.”

4. The GOP programme: <http://www.gop.com/2012-republican-platform> *America/*

“We are the party of sustainable jobs and economic growth – through American energy, agriculture, and environmental policy. We are also the party of America’s growers and producers, farmers, ranchers, foresters, miners, and all those who bring from the earth the minerals and energy that are the lifeblood of our nation’s historically strong economy.

The Republican Party is committed to domestic energy independence. [...] A strong and stable energy sector is a job generator and a catalyst of economic growth, not only in the labor-intensive energy industry but also in its secondary markets. [...]”

Since 2009, the EPA has moved forward with expansive regulations that will impose tens of billions of dollars in new costs on American businesses and consumers. Many of these new rules are creating regulatory uncertainty, preventing new projects from going forward, discouraging new investment, and stifling job creation.

We demand an end to the EPA’s participation in “sue and settle” lawsuits, sweetheart litigation brought by environmental groups to expand the Agency’s regulatory activities against the wishes of Congress and the public. We will require full transparency in litigation under the nation’s environmental laws, including advance notice to all State and local governments, tribes, businesses, landowners, and the public who could be adversely affected. We likewise support pending legislation to ensure cumulative analysis of EPA regulations, and to require full transparency in all EPA decisions, so that the public will know in advance their full impact on jobs and the economy. We oppose the EPA’s unwarranted revocation of existing permits. We also call on Congress to take quick action to prohibit the EPA from moving forward with new greenhouse gas regulations that will harm the nation’s economy and threaten millions of jobs over the next quarter century. The most powerful environmental policy is liberty, the central organizing principle of the American Republic and its people. Liberty alone fosters scientific inquiry, technological innovation, entrepreneurship, and information exchange. Liberty must remain the core energy behind America’s environmental improvement. [...]”

A comment to these quotes is hardly necessary. But let me point just this: they show how powerful is the connexion made by our contemporaries between the right to pursue happiness

and the ongoing seizure of natural resources; the link is so strong that any constraint on the use of nature is characterized as liberticide. In this view, a discourse assigning responsibility to human activity on the natural system, let alone on the possibility of human life in a close future is mocked as fancied catastrophism.

In what follows, I show that all the above-quoted claims emanate in straight line from the core of liberalism, suggesting therefore that providing we admit the urgency of the looming environmental disaster, we, the human collective, should, on that ground alone, renounce liberalism as the guiding norm in our relationship to nature. In what follows I briefly develop five claims on what constitutes the core of liberal ethics and politics which are relevant to the way we as a species relate to nature.

2. Five claims

Claim 1 : in its most effective core¹, liberalism is the ethics and politics of self-ownership as the basis of all rights and duties. Self-ownership is the liberty to dispose of oneself, one's body, one's talents, one's property, etc. so as to promote one's goal, whose realisation, presumably, is one's happiness. This liberty has only one limit : others' symmetric liberty which one has an absolute duty neither to encroach nor to invade.

Whatever your goals, you have to be free to pursue them, as long as they are not, in and of themselves, encroachments to others' liberty, and provided your ways respect this constraint.

The implication of this core assertion is that what has in itself value is only the free self-disposition of the free agents who choose whatever means to pursue their goals within the mentioned constraint. It follows immediately that all that is not this freedom as such has, at best, instrumental value for the only core value recognised by liberalism, i.e. free disposition of oneself. Which implies that environment, nature, natural beings, wilderness, ecosystems, etc. as such can have no value in and of themselves, but only as far as they are instrumentally valued by free agents.

Claim 2 : historically, in its effectiveness, liberalism – following Locke's inheritance through prominent figures like F.A. Hayek and M. Thatcher – has tended to merge with the notion of the free disposition of one's property. To be free means to enjoy the right to do whatever one deems appropriate in the pursuit of one's happiness with the whole bunch of property one has gained through whatever ways (inheritance, successful business, lottery, etc.). Again, the only limit is others' symmetric liberty.

So that, inherently, liberalism means the free disposition of nature defined as the global stock of all the resources that are susceptible for men to appropriate and transform in the pursuit of their goals. Coupling this observation with the competitive character of the capitalist market economy, the result is an ongoing competition between the capital owners in the appropriation of these natural resources. The reason of this necessity is simple: not to enter the race means to take the risk to get overrun by competitors. So that, inherently again, liberalism ends up in a race for power, i.e. in a race for more and more natural resources removed from the environment.

Claim 3 : Liberalism as free self-ownership is tantamount to capitalism. Since capital exists only as divided in a plurality of capital owners, liberalism is, in effect, the ongoing race taking place between them – and now, in our globalized era, at a global level. And the more

¹ This qualification explains why, in this characterization of liberalism I do not consider what I consider as « idealized » versions of liberalism, such as Galston's (W.A Galston, *Liberal purposes*, C.U.P, 1991) for example. Besides, should the idealized versions of liberalism be implemented, they would imply so severe restrictions to free disposition of one's property that most liberal – today they call themselves *libertarians* so as to avoid any confusion with liberals such as R. Dworkin, Rawls' heirs and others – would denigrate such a regime as crypto-socialism.

protagonists there are, the harder the race. In other words, the more predatory of natural resources get the competitors.

In this competition, nature as a whole appears only as the global stock feeding « the economy ». The knowledge of its limitation, though clear to everybody, takes place only in the awareness that the control of the resource will be the property of the first to put his hand on it, according to the « first come, first serve » principle.

Claim 4 : Liberalism as the free for all gets its attraction through its promise of success to all *and* through the message that the only way to success is free market, i.e. competitive economy. In a crippled economy, with high unemployment, severe poverty, high crime, poor access to basic needs such as lodging, health care, education, energy, and so on, the liberal message is for setting aside all the legal obstacles impeding job creation – whatever the cost on nature (see the GOP platform, very clear on this). Having control on most resources, capital exerts a sort of blackmail on all of us : if, they say, you want to have a chance to succeed, allow us to invest in all possible natural resources so that you might have an opportunity to get a job. In other words : either you go with us or you will remain in poverty. It is a sort of sad irony to hear the HNWI (high networth individuals), concentrating in their hands the largest capital ever in history, tell us that we should allow them to concentrate still more capital so that we can access to crumbs of it.

Claim 5 : Liberalism as capitalism is inherently a limitless process of growing. For capital, to stop to grow is to die. And since liberty has merged with economic freedom – see M. Thatcher : to hate free enterprise is to have no patience with individual freedom²– liberalism has merged with the free right of capital to seek for all possible paths to ensure its growth. And again, since capital exists only as divided in plural capital holders, this compulsion to grow is necessarily linked with an ongoing pressure on natural resources that have to be put in the process of the valuing of value – which is the only inherent value in capitalist economy.

One could object to me that liberalism, as a constitutive dimension of democracy, can put limits on the degradation of nature in the name of the common good. Based on a clear and shared knowledge that the limitless exploitation of nature can only drive us to catastrophe which will cause innumerable sufferings and losses for mankind, we, democratically, could decide to stop this whole process, or rather to slow it down drastically.

My reply to that, shortly, is as follows :

1. In the globalized contemporary economy, the strength of liberalism is far above the one of democracy in the sense of « power of the people, by the people, for the people » ; this for the very simple reason that the ones who provide the jobs are the enterprises and not the State. From which follows that our breadwinning depends on the one that ask us to set aside the hurdles limiting free search of future source of profit and of jobs. And between immediate deprivation and the distant future threat, we will tend to act according to the former.
2. Which means that, to give democracy as a self-caring process like described by Joan Tronto in her *Caring Democracy* (NYUP, 2013) a chance implies to end with liberalism, i.e. free market economy, i.e. capitalism
3. Conclusion : because capitalism is in and of itself a process whose very end is the valuing of value, it cannot but treat everything else – nature, environment, animals, seas, mineral resources, other humans as well, etc. – as instrumental to this end : adding an incremental value to today's value ; and this infinitely. Which means that the possibility condition of another relationship towards nature recognizing its intrinsic (or moral) value is to part with liberalism and develop another

² (<http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/102728>)

ethics reshaping our relationship to nature as well as to ourselves and our fellow beings.

In what follows, we give a short tentative version of what this other relationship to nature could look like.

II. Environmental ethics, preservation of human life : what value for nature ? and the possibility of its effectiveness – G. Hess

Both Hans Jonas and Bryan Norton consider that the aim of environmental ethics lies in the preservation of mankind for a long time. But each of them wants to reach this goal through new forms of ethics. Though Jonas elaborates an ethics of the future, Norton thinks about an ethics of “strong sustainability”³. The issue we want to address is how the purpose of the preservation of the future of humankind can be fulfilled.

The objections we will formulate are first, against, Jonas, that it is not necessary to step out of the present to feel a responsibility for the future. And secondly, against Norton, we will support the idea that the long-term, in other words the ecological and geomorphological values of nature, can count only if those values are not instrumental.

To be responsible now for a distant future – a future that commits to an ecological and geomorphological period of time – supposes what we call an “ecumenical community” in which the moral agents experiment the ability to live beyond the closure of the ego.

1. How do we preserve the existence of humankind during an indefinite amount of time?

1.1 Jonas

Jonas addresses this issue with the concept of responsibility. Like the relationship between the parents and their child, the human being is responsible not only for actions in the past, but for what still has to be done. This kind of responsibility introduces a new perspective, that of what is and of what can exist in the future. For Jonas the responsibility concerns the other human, but not only; it concerns natural non-human beings too: animals, plants and other organisms, landscapes, water, air and so on⁴.

From such a responsibility one can deduce a moral duty, that is an obligation towards humans and an obligation towards all parts of nature, the “earthly native land” of humanity, as Jonas calls it. The author expresses it in a categorical imperative: “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life” (p. 11). Such an obligation can only be followed in an adapted political institution. For Jonas, the political structure of such an obligation is “a well-intentioned, well-informed tyranny possessed of the right insights” (p. 147).

To materialize such an obligation towards human life and towards the ecological conditions for its survival in the future, one needs more. The responsibility of Jonas is not only a kind of responsibility for the future; it takes the viewpoint of the future and appeals to the present. The perspective is the one of a long-term future which is able to push humans who presently are alive to commit to the future. Such an anticipation relies on the force of

³ See the classification in Norton Brian G., 2005, *Sustainability. A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, p. 314.

⁴ See Jonas Hans, 1985, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for Technological Age*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, chapter 3, section 4.

imagination. Jonas speaks of a “heuristic of fear” of which the goal is not to paralyze freezing action. On the contrary, it aims to avoid the realisation of a disaster⁵.

1.2 Norton

Norton does not believe one can care about the preservation of humankind in the future by means of responsibility. He sees the ability to consider the long-term in an ethics which concerns common natural goods, especially ecological and geomorphological ones. Such goods are those which a community wishes to pass on to the future generations⁶. They are not concerned with individuals but with the community itself. Therefore a community has the obligation to maintain a flow of resources for a indefinite time.

This obligation is similar to the obligation of Jonas towards humans. Norton speaks of “generalized obligations” and he thinks they can be realized in environmental policies by communicative action and discourse⁷. A pluralism of values animates contemporary democratic societies. Members of a community will stand up for divergent values in looking for consensus⁸.

Diverging from Jonas who defends a kind of strong hierarchical ecocentrism, Norton believes that only humans bear moral value. Mankind must be understood through the very long history of life and the progressive complexity of organisms. But nevertheless today this history constitutes the human environment. Humanity is a good thing. “A universe containing human consciousness, he says, is preferable to one without it.” (1984, p. 143). Thus the perpetuation of human life in the future becomes a moral aim and it can be fulfilled if human communities recognize ecological and geomorphological values.

This “weak anthropocentrism” (1984, p. 134), as Norton calls it, must be understood in the context of a methodology of environmental management. This methodology must not focus on the short-term of experience but on the ecological long-term of the human community and on the geomorphological long-term of the species.

2. Some difficulties to consider long-term future

We have seen that Jonas endorses the role of a prophet. The question is: can such prophesied future of humanity have a real impact on the sensitivity of humans who presently are alive so that they commit to the long-term? Responsibility is a feeling and we do not think that humans can be afflicted by beings whose virtual existence relies on the imagination of a possible disaster. Imagination is actually the only basis for long-term responsibility. It is doubtful that it could trigger a responsibility for such virtual beings, because it is felt in the present. What exists now can awaken my responsibility, but not what does not exist yet.

We have seen that Norton thinks of a moral commitment to future human generations not from the viewpoint of the future, but from the present of the human community. Present communities, here and now, allocate values to nature, such as ecological and geomorphological ones which they want to pass on to their descendants. The problem now lies in the present itself. The difficulty is of giving preference to those values by reaching a consensus on them.

Norton believes that such values are instrumental values though non-use values⁹. They are like short-term economic values. But if ecological and geomorphological values are of the same kind than economic values, why would they outweigh the latter? In a discussion the

⁵ See *ibid.*, chapter 2, section 1.

⁶ See Norton, 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 234, 240, 388.

⁷ Norton, 1984, “Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism”, *Environmental Ethics*, 6, p. 144.

⁸ See Norton 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 176-179.

short-term economic point of view is seen as rational and there will always be good reasons to give them primacy: economic recession, unemployment, poverty, precariousness, social injustice, and so on. So we think it is wishful thinking that ecological and geomorphological values can prevail if they are understood as instrumental values.

We can observe such situations in cases where the soil of natural reserves with rich biodiversity, like the park Yasuni in the Amazon part of Ecuador for instance, are abundant with fossil energy. Why should the community protect such areas in the long-term future using ecological values when the income of their economic exploitation would contribute to eradicate the poverty of local populations?

If ecological and geomorphological values are effectively implemented in environmental policies it is because the natural environment of human communities has a *value for itself* for their members, clearly different from an instrumental value. The value of nature for itself can only prevail if there *first* was a debate on this value, before any discussion about solutions to environmental issues has happened. And it will prevail, *because* one does not consider it as an instrumental value. Norton himself seems to confess in his book *Sustainability* that nature always has a *constitutive* value for the human communities, a value which constitutes the identity of the communities.

The existence in nature of a constitutive value or of a value for itself means eventually that the community cannot be superimposed with a community of communication. It cannot, in other words, be exclusively human.

3. The ecumenical community

Norton's position is that discourse ethics to which the human community refers aims at the consensus through a debate which confronts a plurality of values and interests. Such values and interests are exclusively human, since only mankind can participate to the community of communication.

But a community, which presently feels responsible for the future of humanity, cannot be simply a human community. It must be an ecumenical community. This concept refers to an entity, that is a totality composed of members – human, animal, perhaps vegetal too – distributed among various living environments, depending in the species they belong to and the type of natural environment they live in¹⁰. All members of the community and all living environments have a moral value for the human members of it. But if the ecumenical community actually exists, we cannot perceive it. Its limit is found in being itself. We could give the ecumenical community a moral value only from the outside of the community, which is not possible.

This shift towards a holistic viewpoint seems to be a necessary precondition for a debate – that means a discussion between humans – which takes the survival of mankind in the long-term future seriously. Without such a kind of holism – say an anthropological one – to care about future generations means nothing, because that cannot be a real motivation in the discussion and eventually has no effect in political decisions.

Moreover ethics of the ecumenical community is essentially ethics based on the experience of alterity or otherness – the other human and the other of nature – which goes beyond the closure of the ego.

¹⁰ See the book of Berque Augustin, 2000, *Écoumène. Introduction à l'étude des milieux humains*, Paris, Belin, for the idea of "ecoumen" which is here used in an extended and some different way.