PROCESS ECOLOGICAL ETHICS
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Introduction

A Consultation on Religion and the Environment could do with at least one paper from within the broad tradition of Process Thinking. After all, the Process tradition has rather strong credentials in ecological thinking, within Christian theology and in the cross-religions dialogue especially with Buddhism. John Cobb, the foremost living process person after Charles Hartshorne, for example, is quite strong in all three, and there are lots of others with strength in one or other area (see References for some examples) and also some ecofeminist theologians e.g. Marjorie Suchocki. The following paper has the aim of adding this tradition as a voice in the dialogue in which this Consultation consists.¹

Process Ecological Ethics is based in a broad metaphysical vision, a characteristic which it shares with the ethics of Spinoza or that of Deep Ecology (esp. Arne Naess). A major part of the paper will need to be spent on explaining this Process Relational metaphysical vision, with due regard to significant variations among process thinkers. We can then make a passage from metaphysics to ethics, look at some of the typical characteristics of Process Ecological Ethics and finally turn our attention to questions of implementation in practice.

The Process Relational Metaphysical Vision

Process Metaphysics or Process Relational Metaphysics as it is sometimes called, in all its versions is blatantly revisionary rather than descriptive. It seeks to change our thinking at a deep level rather than just explicate the way we typically already think. Or at least it strongly suggests such a change. It does this in the name of coherence, consistency and adequacy to the totality of our experience, including scientific, artistic and religious experience. (Cf. Whitehead 1929, 5.) It does this also for the sake of the smoother attainment of beauty, harmony, and peace, of the good and the beautiful in our lives, in our relationships with each other and within the concerns we have as an interacting part of the natural world. (Cf. Esp. Whitehead 1933.)

Connected Events rather than Substances

Process people suggest that the world consists in events, happenings, processes in various kinds of connections or ‘nexus’. This is the case, rather than the world consisting in substances or enduring substantial things with properties which more or less maintain their identity independently of time and relation. Substances are cashed in as certain kinds of connected systems of events. In some versions, these events or processes may be nested inside each other. In other versions all bona fida events are microscopic and there is no inclusion of one in the other. (See Moses 1997 for details if interested.) For all versions time is of the essence, and

¹ This paper owes much to the work of a small Process Ethics discussion group in 2nd Semester 1997 within the Brisbane College of Theology. This group included Pat Hall from the lecturing staff and postgraduate students John Bretz and Joyce Byerlee plus the author of this paper. I wish to hereby acknowledge my indebtedness to this group, while claiming all errors and inadequacies for myself.
everything takes some time to happen.

**Strongly Relational with Creativity**

The Process universe is strongly relational, strongly connected rather than either atomistic or totally holistic. It is also rather strong on creativity. Everything is a more or less creative taking account of its total past environment, and a giving of itself to be taken into account by the future of the environment. This is broad enough to include electronic events on the one hand and the event of you here and now reading this paper on the other. That latter is also a particular way of taking account of your total social and natural environment, at a certain point in your life, for the sake of the future of that environment. The same might be said about my writing this paper. Striving to be less anthropomorphic in our statement but rather more abstract: everything is reception, transformation and transmission of something like energy and information from total past environment to total future environment.

In other words, everything is an environmental event or else a connected series or *nexus* of such events. But not only that. Everything adds something to the process, everything makes a difference, albeit oftentimes oh so slight. This latter conviction is one of the features that stop the scheme being strongly holistic to the point of being totalising. Everything is an environmental event, but it is also a little bit individual, it cannot be entirely cashed in terms of its ensemble of social relations. The other feature is a differing relation to past and to future. An event is internally related to its past, cannot be described or conceived except as a particular way of taking account of that past. On the other hand, it is externally related to the future. What it is here and now is describable and conceivable apart from the way things actually work out. Certain futures are made probable by the present events, but not entirely certain, at least not down to the last detail.

**Different complexity of environment and different levels of natural event**

The kind and degree of connectivity is still rather important in the scheme, however. As the universe evolves, there is a progressive development towards more and more subtle and complex kinds of environmental order, capable of supporting the existence of higher and higher-grade systems of series of events, and eventually of those kinds of series of events we call animal and human minds. In our cosmic epoch, which is to say, in the world as we experience it today, there are a broad variety of kinds of middle sized phenomena, ranging from ‘aggregates’, such as rocks, to ‘compound individuals’, such as koalas, dolphins and human beings. Compound individuals are where there appears to be a presiding or dominant more or less well connected temporal series of high-grade events in the system providing for a kind of global control. For example, in our case the human mind. An example of an aggregate would be a rock or a pile of rocks. In between would be crystals and also plants. Plants are rather more organized and co-ordinated in response to environment than are aggregates, but they do not appear to have a presiding series of events as coordinating element. As Hartshorne puts it, plants are democracies of cells. What this makes us I’m not so sure! What might we say of a forest? Would this count as a democracy of trees and other flora and fauna?

The metaphysical system thus postulates different levels of natural events, the level
being proportional to the quality of reception and transformation and the consequent likely effectiveness and spread of the transmission. The higher the grade event the more the capacity for taking into account the environment and responding to it in a creative fashion. On the other hand, as stated previously, what kinds of events are possible is a function of the richness of the sustaining environment. In a too poor environment the rich events might well be the first to go. Meanwhile, the quality and effective extent of the reception, the degree of creativity or self-initiative in the transformation and the likely effectiveness of the transmission are taken as capable of almost indefinite degrees in both directions, from the smallest sub-atomic events in the midst of space to God. Human and animal consciousness, in this scheme, is thus no big deal, just something that may arise quite naturally in certain rich environments. They are a particular intensification of what is going on all over the place.

Certain key people in the process tradition go on to talk in terms of Pan-psychism (Hartshorne) or at least Pan-experientialism (Griffin), soul or at least experience everywhere. There are other people, including this writer and a number of others at the May 1997 Conference of the Australasian Association for Process thought, who wonder whether such expressions are worth their price on the open market. What is essential to the scheme is a multi-layered or multi-level or differentiated ontology: there are different species or levels of natural event, albeit sharing the same basic structure. Everything is a particular way of taking account of its environment and a gift by nature to the future of that environment. There are no vacuous actualities, nothing which does nothing. Though certain aggregates of smaller actualities give the impression of being rather vacuous in so far as the various contributions cancel out. However, there is no need to say that soul or even experience is everywhere. Thus goes the argument of those of us who would like to be more cautious.

**Human beings as self-conscious interacting parts of nature**

We human beings are high-grade natural events enmeshed in an environment of natural events of various kinds. This is to say that for process people we are very much an interacting part of the natural world. What makes us, and perhaps some other animals or creatures on other planets different, is that we can know that we are an interacting part of Nature. More grandiosely, we are within that class of natural events wherein Nature comes to know itself. What this does is to give us something else to take account of in our self-constituting, which thereby opens the way to ethics. Before we come to that, however, a word on God and religion.

**God as affecting all and affected by all**

Process metaphysical systems are mostly theistic, though even in the Whiteheadian camp there are also non-theistic versions (esp. Donald Sherburne). For our purposes, we may distinguish a spectrum of views from minimal religious naturalism’ (Stone, 1993) to various maximal possibilities. Minimal religious naturalism talks in terms of immanent and transcendent resources for the task of living together in the natural world, without specifying a single metaphysical source for these resources. There is in our lives, for example, a lure towards goodness, truth and beauty, and perhaps something analogous to this further down the line.
There are a variety of maximal theistic versions, those of Whitehead, Hartshorne, Cobb, Griffin, Suchocki, the Christian Trinitarianism of Joe Bracken to mention some of them. Typically and deriving from Whitehead, God is noted as principle of limitation providing a kind of focus for the cosmic process; also as principle of possibility and of novelty within the process. There is also a fairly common division made between the Primordial Nature and the Consequent Nature of God, with sometimes also a Projective or Superjective Nature thrown in. Roughly, this comes down to, God as Creative, God as Receptive and God as Responsive. There is also the God as Primordial Qualification of Creativity of the Belgian philosopher Jan Van der Veken, this last being accessible as something religious people would recognize as God only on the basis of particular religious experiences. This avoids turning God into just another being amongst the beings as well as recognizing ‘God’ as a specifically religious notion. What all agree on is belief in a God who affects all and is affected by all, affected by the fall of the sparrow in the silent spring and the flowers of the field or lack thereof and the hair on your head falling out. This is, moreover, a God who persuades and does not determine, and who is not by any means an overgrown absolute monarch or some kind of power-mad patriarch.

While a minimal religious naturalism may be sufficient to ground some kind of broadening of concern and discerning of worth beyond the human sphere (Stone 1993; see also Mesle 1993), theists propose that they have rather firmer grounds (see esp. Cobb, in Mesle 1993).

The Passage to Ethics

The passage from a metaphysic to an ethic is not always smooth, and rarely if ever a matter of straight deduction (cf. Vogel 1995). Often it is just a difficult to define species of coherence between the metaphysics expressed and the ethics espoused. Given the metaphysics, some ethical stances make more sense than others do and certain ethical stances look rather irrational in the circumstances.

There are at least two ways of getting ethics out of our metaphysics.

One could for example lean on the process relational version of the Buddhist ‘No Self’ doctrine and push it in a direction reminiscent of some of the Deep Ecologists (e.g. Naess). A human person is a succession of events with personal order, maintaining a high degree of similarity through time, a certain style, such that in looking for causes we look to previous mental and bodily events. But we look not only to past mental and bodily events. The distinction between past mental events, the body and the social and natural environment is only a relative distinction. I am a (creative) function of my body and of my total natural and social environment. Which is stronger or more important in an individual case is an empirical matter. I am constituted by/constitute myself on the basis of my total past environment, in view of the total future, which is in this sense also my total future. In the final resort, I am everything that affects me and everything that I affect. All boundaries are relativised. All boundaries are permeable. Given this, there appear to be no reasons why concern should not be generalized to include all elements which affect me and which I affect.
The more usual pattern for a process ecological ethics, however, is to rely on certain features of the metaphysical vision in order to do two things. Firstly, we rely on the fact that we are very much natural beings in the midst of natural beings in order to motivate an extension of ‘intrinsic value’ or value in and of itself, value as an end not just a means, well beyond the human sphere. Secondly, we rely particularly on the differentiated ontology to motivate differential assignment of value, including degrees of intrinsic value for the sake of resolving conflicts. Thus Birch, Cobb, McDaniel, Armstrong-Buck (see references). In the next section of this paper, we will spend time on some general features of this more usual view.

Some General Features of Process Ecological Ethics

Intrinsic and Extrinsic or Instrumental Value

This is a fairly straightforward distinction. Value is the good in the context of action. Something or some process has intrinsic value if it ought to be valued in and of itself apart from its usefulness to other things or processes. Something or some process has instrumental value if it is useful to the existence or thriving of other things or processes, and in proportion to its contribution to such existence or thriving. The extension of intrinsic value beyond the human sphere is important for two reasons. It makes processes outside the human sphere valuable quite independently of their contribution to human life. Also and just as importantly, it prevents extrinsic value from cashing out eventually as value for human beings. Of course, extrinsic value does include value for human beings: we are part of it all after all. However, it also includes value for other creatures.

In a typical case, value is assigned usually to a connected series of natural events or processes within a certain total context, e.g. a koala colony in an old growth forest in fair ecological equilibrium. This would involve weighing up of both intrinsic and instrumental value. In practice, however, I don’t think anyone does a Bentham like calculation. It is more a matter of global intuitive response sharpened or perhaps changed by further investigation of the details, with certain strong process-motivated convictions about what the world is like in mind. Eventually, there is no decision procedure. Eventually it takes a degree of phronesis, wisdom chiseled out in practice that comes from being in the right way and knowing how to use our knowledge. But see later.

Degrees of Intrinsic Value

It is uncontroversial that instrumental value has degrees. Process ecological ethics typically makes intrinsic value also to have degrees, unlike deep ecologists and some Eco-feminists and other advocates of ecological egalitarianism or ecological democracy. Interestingly, this is also contrary to the main line in natural law, classical utilitarianism and Kantian traditions of ethics, where those creatures valued as an end (usually human beings) are typically regarded as equal in value to each other.

Once it is decided to assign degrees of intrinsic value, one way forward would be to assign intrinsic value in proportion to quality of natural event, that is, quality of
reception, transformation and transformation etc. That is, the multi-layered or differentiated ontology maps onto a multi-layered or differentiated deontology. This has a certain elegance about it. Every actuality or series of actualities or every compound individual has intrinsic value, though sometimes it is negligible. There are no vacuous actualities, nor are there any intrinsically valueless actualities. Just as there are different levels of event, however, so there are different degrees of intrinsic value at stake.

Some process people do give the impression of wanting to go this way. By way of illustration, from Susan Armstrong-Buck:

The third tenet states that every actual occasion experiences its self-creation, whether it is part of a living or of a non-living entity. Actual occasions are not bits of dead matter, but are experiencers of the world…

Second, the use of _experience_ in this broad sense allows Whitehead to assert that each thing has intrinsic value…Whitehead’s system thus provides a basis for solving what Callicott has insightfully termed “the central and most recalcitrant problem for environmental ethics. For example, because for Whitehead intrinsic value resides in the fact that all actual occasions enjoy their own self-creation, no _one_ quality or property is arbitrarily singled out to provide intrinsic value, such as rationality, self-consciousness, sentience, and so forth. (Armstrong-Buck 1986 244-245)

The problem with this is precisely the other side of its strength: it is altogether too interlaced with the metaphysics. People who don’t accept the metaphysics find it rather implausible. In addition there is a certain dilemma. If ‘intrinsic value’ is extended all the way to sub-atomic particles its assignment is either massively counter-intuitive or else seems to rob the notion of ‘intrinsic value’ of any useful meaning.

So process people in practice sometimes talk of sentiency or the capacity for feeling or something like that as the ground for intrinsic value, being careful to extend this sentiency or capacity for feeling or whatever as far as they plausibly can, though not necessarily all the way. Thus Birch (Birch 1997):

We have almost entirely regarded animals as having instrumental value for us. They are valuable to us for their food and fur, as workhorses and as companions. But are these their only values? The considered answer now must be that non-human animals have their own intrinsic value just as humans do. They have value in themselves, to themselves and to God… (48-49)

Only subjects have _intrinsic value_. What gives them intrinsic value is that they feel. Only feelings confer intrinsic value. It is not only humans who feel the world. So do all sentient animals. Their feelings may be very different from ours, but they do have feelings. (49)

The animals around us should therefore be treated not merely as
means but as ends in themselves... At the same time, the recognition
of the intrinsic value of all animals clearly implies the expansion of
compassion and justice to them all. (52)

So also Dombrowski in his latest book, *Babies and Beasts*, where he makes use of
the criterion of *sentiency* so as to extend the scope of *moral patiency* (versus just
moral agency) at least as far as animals with central nervous systems. (Dombrowski
1997) In this work he specifically argues against lowering the criterion of moral
patiency to include all life. See also his previous book, where he is already invoking
the argument from sentiency as a basis for intrinsic value. (Dombrowki 1988, 74)

*Is this just another anthropocentrism and the reinstitution of hierarchies?*

Either way we are in trouble. It is not so much the extension of intrinsic value that
worries. For extension of ecological concern, that is a good idea. The problem lies
with the admission that it has degrees when coupled with the apparent implication
that they are degrees on the same spectrum. In such circumstances, human beings
almost inevitably end up as having the highest degree we know of apart from God.
(Thus Plumwood 1993, 130.)

There are at least two considerations that process people invoke or might invoke to
escape the charge of continuing anthropocentrism.

Firstly, a high degree of extrinsic value can well go with low degrees of intrinsic
value. This is typical indeed of creatures at the bottom of a food chain, e.g. plankton.

Secondly it doesn't follow just from A is more valuable than B that A can do what it
likes with B. No, we need another premise. In addition, B has to be necessary for
the life of A or something like that. Unless very loosely interpreted, in affluent
Western countries where one can buy wholesome vegetarian food at reasonable
prices in supermarkets and health food stores, this is not enough even to justify meat
eating. Whereas it readily allows Eskimos and aborigines in traditional environments
to eat meat, which latter is an advantage I suspect. An alleged anthropocentrism
that cannot justify meat eating is not much of an anthropocentrism. See especially
the example of Dombrowski.

The present author is still a bit uncomfortable about this. It is at this point that one
might be better off talking in terms of a differentiated *rather than* a multi-layered or
multi-level ontology, mapping on to a differentiated deontology or value assignment.
It is not necessarily the case that anything they can do we can do better. While all
events have a certain common event structure (everything is a more or less creative
eq etc.), there may be specific differences in how this event structure is instantiated,
which differences need not in all cases map onto the same spectrum. (Cf.
Plumwood 1993, 130, 134-5.) In such situations we should not talk of high and low,
just different, both ontologically and deontologically. This rather spoils the possibility
of calculation in case of conflict. But it never was a genuine possibility anyway.
Individuals and Ecosystems

This is another problem that some people have with classic Whiteheadian or Hartshornean process. It seems that only individuals have intrinsic value, that is to say, individual actualities and compound individuals. Ecosystems as such have only instrumental value, as providing a context for the thriving of the individuals. This may in many cases be rather high, but it is only instrumental. It is not as if ecosystems as such are valuable in themselves.

To some people, this seems counter-intuitive. Ecosystems have a species of beauty all their own. It is not just their use value for their membership that seems to count.

In a recent article in *Process Studies*, Andrew J. Kerr does a fair job of explaining how on good Whiteheadian grounds ecosystems possess moral significance even though they do not have intrinsic value. This is because the achievement of intrinsic value is a function of the character of the environment. (See above, the importance of environment for high-grade events.) This being so, environmental considerations may well be, in their own right, a source of moral norms. (Kerr 1995) Indeed Kerr goes so far as to propose a direct derivation of some such norms from ecosystem laws (Kerr 1995, 85-87).

Revisionist versions of Whitehead-derived process thinking as well as some less atomistic non-Whiteheadian process systems (e.g. Rescher 1996) might do even better. One interesting revisionist version of Whiteheadian process that could, if pushed just a little bit, have some prospects of solving the problem might be the metaphysics of energy events and fields of Joseph Bracken. According to this metaphysics, fields are equiprimordial with events. There are no fields without events, and events constitute fields. On the other hand, there are no events without fields; events put themselves together on the basis of the fields in which they find themselves. Fields carry contributions made by events through time, and events clue into the fields rather than past events themselves, which are not there any more to be clued into after all. Moreover, it is the fields that carry structure across time through changes of the elements. If fields are ontologically equiprimordial, why not regard them as deontologically equiprimordial also? This would introduce two equiprimordial species of intrinsic value, I think, and allow us with good conscience to give ecosystems as such intrinsic value.

A further way, not inconsistent with either of the above, might be to build on Whitehead’s distinction in *Adventures of Ideas* between Beauty and the Beautiful. Beauty is the harmony and intensity of experience. The Beautiful is what contributes to the harmony and intensity of experience. One may then ask a version of Plato’s famous question (or one of his many famous questions!): is the Beautiful beautiful because it contributes to the harmony and intensity of experience, or does it contribute to the harmony and intensity of experience because it is beautiful? (See the *Euthyphro.*

The bottom line, I suppose, is that it may be possible to give ecosystems value in their own right, without departing too much from even the Whiteheadian process tradition.
The Problem of Marginal Cases

Our Brisbane College of Theology Process Ethics group sometimes noted this as 'the Singerian Paradox' after Prof. Peter Singer whose early work in particular we were otherwise rather impressed with. According to this idea, the effort to widen moral concern beyond the human species can have the effect of lessening moral concern for certain 'marginal' members of the human species, such as babies, severely handicapped people, people with senile dementia. Babies and pigs, considered as here and now actualities, have a similar place in the scale of being, so should be treated similarly. What makes it interesting for this paper is that process people can also fall into this paradox (see Cobb 1991). In the Process case, this comes about as another, perhaps unwelcome, consequence of allowing intrinsic value to have degrees.

What makes this especially paradoxical is that people on the so-called margins are precisely the ones whose dignity requires to be defended. The ones in the main line, the fully-fledged 'persons', can typically look after themselves.

The process thinker Daniel Dombrowski, in two closely argued works (Dombrowski 1988, 1997) has shown that the argument can be pushed in the other direction. Instead of saying, babies are like pigs, therefore should be treated no differently from pigs, Dombrowski proposes, pigs are like babies and therefore should be treated no differently from babies. It is not even necessary to justify our reverence of babies, just that we do so (Dombrowski 1988). Given this we should also reverence pigs. Logically we should all be vegetarians, though Dombrowski admits doing the right thing in this situation may require from some saintly virtue (Dombrowski 1988, 136).

Dombrowski’s system has the advantage of deftly avoiding both of the seeming paradoxes mentioned above.

Charles Birch in his recent book Living with the Animals (Birch, 1997, p. 56) is careful not to commit himself, regarding this as a complex and contentious issue which it is not his purpose to go into.

Not having either the time or the ability to write two books, for the sake of this paper a few paragraphs of comment may have to do.

I would go one step further than Birch and argue that this issue is a needless complication, which tends to bring the environmental movement into disrepute among otherwise sympathetic people, derived mostly from taking our theories too seriously and thinking we can totalise the field with a single ethical system. Ecological ethics is a rather recent invention. There are well-developed ethical traditions for dealing with the intra-human sphere that have been going for centuries, in some cases for millennia. Altogether, it has taken an enormous amount of time and effort, with the help of such traditions, to extend our concern as far as we have. Even that is very tenuous in places: we can’t really afford any excuse for going backwards. Secondly, as Hume has amply demonstrated and in spite of the preferences of some philosophers, in any case it is not necessary that all human behaviour be rationally justified at a certain point in time by us human beings in order for us to be justified in continuing with it. The demand for rationalization is highly
exaggerated. We human beings may well be into all kinds of practices that at a
certain point in time we may not understand, e.g. burying the dead. Should we stop
doing that, merely because we haven’t been able to rationally appropriate it? Or only
bury people who have living relatives perhaps? We should try for overall consistency
in our various practices, but probably all that is needed is speculative consistency
rather than provable consistency, that given certain not totally implausible
considerations our various practices might be consistent. (For the idea, compare

Thirdly, there are indeed a number of considerations consistent with the process
tradition which added together might give us the appropriate pause, even apart from
turning us into vegetarians in the quite logical manner of Dombrowski. For example,
process people can’t blithely dismiss potentiality. Potentiality is of the essence of a
Whiteheadian or a Hartshornean actual entity. Being is a potential for all future
becoming, “the many become one and are increased by one” etc. The future events
and environment will determine whether and how that potentiality is realized, but
potentiality as such is an element of what that event is. Indeed, in a precise
technical sense, ethics could be regarded as a learned guide for responsibly taking
account of the potentiality coming to us from the past.

On the other side, a case might well be made on process grounds for reverencing
projects, coherent processes e.g. Mr. Smith, Ms. Jones, rather than or in addition to
individual events. This would fit in well with the way we actually work. Whatever
about the theory it is totally impractical to reverence only individual events. It also
fits with the way Hartshorneans operate with respect to God. It may well be
consistent with this to continue to require Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones to be respected
even when they end up in a nursing home not knowing where they are or why they
are there. It is still Mr. Smith there and Ms. Jones, still the same project, still the
same coherent process. They haven’t simply disappeared off the face of the earth.

Finally, there is Dombrowski’s distinction between the criteria for moral agency,
which would presumably exclude the so-called ‘marginal’ individuals, and the criteria
for moral patiency, which might well include them.

Whatever, for the sake of this paper let’s assume that this allegedly *needless
distraction* can be taken care of some how or other, and get back to our main line of
widening in practice our ethical concern well beyond the human species.

**Implementing the Process Vision**

There are at least two issues to be dealt with. Firstly, can process ways of thinking
give any guidance to concrete decision making processes? Secondly, how if at all
can we stop process thinking in ecology from being just another elite discourse?

*Decision procedures?*

In answer to the first question and as a first try, our Process Ethics group came up
with a five-step procedure. As it happened, the inspiration for the procedure was a
meditation on how we went about choosing the wines for the enjoyment of
participants at the May 1997 Sydney conference of the Australasian Association for Process Thought. The procedure went as follows:

1. Access the situation as broadly and as deeply as possible. This step is pretty obvious. Process thinking just adds: the relevant situation consists in all living creatures affected taken in their total context, with human beings in their concrete social reality as one player.

2. Decide on what outcomes are excluded, decide on the non-negotiables, what is beyond the pale. This was quite easy in the bottle shop.

3. Within the scope of what remains, consider together how best to enhance the harmony and intensity of experience of all creatures involved, the best integration of unity and variety, the total thriving in a rich environment. We are interacting parts of the total natural process. How can we responsibly, artistically, most creatively participate?

4. Check what we come up with in stage 3 against 2 and 1.

5. Collective communal decision, the working towards a communal reflective equilibrium, leading to implementation, which will constitute a new situation, which may stimulate a further run through the procedure.

In our process, we make use of whatever knowledges there are at our disposal, but strive always to avoid what Whitehead calls the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, which is to say, confusing abstract models, e.g. from some economic think-tank, with the total concrete reality. (Cf. Daly 1989.)

One interesting thing about this model is that it patterns a typical process event. Step 1 = Reception, Steps 2 through 4 = Transformation, Step 5 = Transmission. Or, Steps 1 through 4 = creatively taking into account our total past environment, and Step 5 = giving ourselves in ways to be taken into account by the future of that environment. To complete the pattern: the Lure of Goodness, Truth and Beauty functions as Principle of Limitation in Step 2 and as Principle of Possibility and Novelty in Step 3. We think of ourselves in our environmental concern as a process that makes a creative, responsible input into the total process under the Lure of the Divine Mystery, or something like that.

It didn’t take us long to realize that our procedure was a bit naïve. Everything depends on who does it. Process ecological ethics can’t be just applying principles or balancing value. It has to do as well with character transformation, with what kinds of individuals and communities and nations we are, with ingrained changes in the way we operate. Everything is a more or less creative taking into account etc., but everything depends on the how and the how depends on the who, the character, the style of the how, which is to say, with ecological virtue. This lead in our group to a kind of definition of Process Ethics:

Process Ethics = striving to intervene in our own process, individual and communal and national and international, and to embed the consequences in habitual ways of behaving, in habitual ways for that process to go, lured on by ideals which themselves keep moving.
In other words, we moved from ecological consequentialism with some touches of deontology (cf. Step 2 above) to a process ecological virtue ethic. (Compare also Plumwood 1993, 182-189.)

*Just another elite discourse?*

If we are as individuals and as a nation to take back control of our lives, subordinating economy to community and making the human community into a creatively interacting part of the total Australian and eventually total earth environment, our process ethic can’t be just another elite discourse. In the present context in Australian politics we could regard this as responding to the John Howard critique.

There are at least two forces to align with.

Firstly, as the Melbourne-based process-aligned philosopher Aaron Gare has noted (Gare 1995, Chapter 5), among the forces capable of competing at the moment with the supremely totalising force of globalising free market economics are various forms of nationalism and regionalism. It makes sense therefore to align ourselves with them: think locally, act globally. (Gare 1995, 162.) There is certainly a point here. Lots of people who never think of themselves as Greens still do lots of recycling. People do worry about the pollution of their locality and their region even where they might claim not to worry about pollution as such. On the national level, the Pauline Hanson phenomenon has shown us something of the power of this particular force, however much we may regret the xenophobic and racist form it has taken in this case. The problem, indeed, is to rescue it from the tendency to xenophobia, towards a truly postmodern constructive form of nationalism. It would appear to be rather dangerous to hang process thinking on the coattails of a discredited nationalism, which the 20th Century has proved to be a rather irrational and dangerously uncontrollable force. However, in the circumstances there may not be any alternative. In spite of the problems involved in reforming such a force, given what is against us it may well be the case that, as Gare puts it earlier in the chapter, “the liberation of life will be achieved through the development of a reformulated nationalism or not at all.” (Gare 1995, 147).

Secondly, as has been demonstrated graphically in the recent debate about Wik, the religions are still with us.

It is at this point that this mainly philosophical paper joins strongly with the theme of this Consultation on Religion and the Environment. Religions are still effective in the business of consciousness raising when every other force seems to fail. Religions are in the business of personal and communal character formation via various forms of transformative practice, including prayer and meditative techniques as well as rituals and insertion of people into narratives of various kinds. Modern Western philosophy is not much good at this. Religions do continue to serve to broaden concern, to all the human and beyond the human, to minimize the confining and limiting influence of ego, to improve the element of transformative creativity, to open us to the immanent and transformative resources in the total process. Whatever else they do, religions can well serve to focus for us the power of the Lure to
Goodness, Truth, Beauty, Harmony and Peace.

Here, process thinking seems to be on a winner, in so far as it has already a solid and well developed theological wing across Christian denominations, and an excellent record in cross-religions dialogue, especially with Japanese and to a lesser extent Chinese Buddhism. Indeed, this theological and religious side is much more solidly developed than its more recent ecological wing, though rather easy to integrate as the example of the Claremont CA theologians John Cobb and David Griffin in particular makes very clear.

Conclusion

By way of summary: process ecological ethics is among those varieties of ethics firmly based in a metaphysic. This metaphysics is revisionary rather than just descriptive, striving to get us into a new way of thinking and talking and, eventually, acting, rather than just to describe how we in fact think and talk and act. This revisionary metaphysics is into events or process rather than enduring substances or things. These events are typically strongly connected to and dependent on each other though always a little bit creative. Such events come in various kinds, while maintaining a common structure. Everything is a particular way of taking account of its total past environment and a giving of itself to be taken into account by the future of that environment. However, different events do this in different ways and to different degrees.

Process ecological ethics relies on the metaphysics in order to advance ‘intrinsic value’ well beyond the human sphere, while nevertheless allowing for degrees of intrinsic value. Typically, only individuals have such intrinsic value, whereas ecosystems have usually a high degree of instrumental value. However, some varieties of process ethics may also give ecosystems intrinsic value. Sometimes intrinsic value is extended to all actualities, sometimes only to those endowed with sentiency or feeling or something like that. The admission that intrinsic value might have degrees can have certain detrimental effects within the human sphere at the so-called margins. However, such effects can be mitigated and perhaps even eliminated. There still remains a tendency towards anthropocentrism in the general system, which may require some changes in both the ethics and the metaphysics.

Process thinking can well inspire practical decision making in situations of ecological concern, and also and more importantly the transformation of the people who make such decisions. To be truly effective however it cannot be just an exercise in philosophy. It needs to break beyond being just another elite discourse. It needs to align itself with the only existing forces capable of standing up to the current global obsession with market forces, including both nationalism and religion. In respect of religion, process thinking can be taken as already well advanced in this regard, having a solid theological and religious strand already well developed and quite congenial to ecological concern.
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