Social Institutions, Education, and Nature: Considering Environmental (Re)Education through the Works of John Dewey and G.H. Mead

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This paper argues that a resolution of the current debate over our relationship with the environment can be aided by the intentional structuring of the educational environment, both formal and informal, to include at every level of education the concept that nature is a social institution. Drawing on the work of George Herbert Mead and John Dewey, this paper aims to show that most environmental problems, and the solutions proffered to them, stem from a fundamentally flawed understanding of the relationship between the self and "nature." Only by directly and actively acknowledging this division may we properly address current environmental issues. I suggest that the key is thorough and deeply ecological conception of education such as we find in Dewey read in light of Mead's social philosophy.

I am certainly not the first to note that many of the current environmental problems and debates stem from this common understanding of nature as something-other-than-us. In his essay "The Environmental Value in G.H. Mead's Cosmology" Ari Santas notes that, "The problem—perhaps the main problem—with which environmentalism has to deal is getting people to see the connections between themselves and the rest of the world."[1] The uniqueness of the approach I am proposing is in the attempt to address environmental concerns by arguing that the root of such problems is found in the relationship between self-identity and those institutions that help to shape that identity. By coupling Mead's work on the development of the self through social institutions with some of Dewey's work on education I aim to show that we have both a way of conceiving of nature as a social institution and, through Dewey, a means of utilizing and deepening the implications of this understanding.

The Shape of the Problem

In the summer or 2011 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service proposed restricting boating and other recreational activity on King's Bay in Orange County, Florida in an effort better protect the Bay's famous manatee population. Many Orange County citizens

and civic groups opposed the restrictions. None, however, presented a more vehement opposition than members of the local Tea Party. Their spokesperson Edna Mattos, argued that "we cannot elevate nature above people."[2] I hold that Mattos' claim is no exception but is rather indicative of the common understanding of the human relationship to the natural world.

In fairness to Mattos and those who oppose environmental regulations, many of the regulations and solutions offered to environmental problems also stem from the same type of dualistic thinking.[3] There is implicit in our conception of nature that it is "something-other-than-me."[4] This distancing between the self and nature is at the root of both the environmental problems that we face and the solutions that we offer to those problems. Recognizing that the division is there and that it *perhaps* ought not to be is clearly not enough. *We* must actually believe it to be the case.[5] The emphasis here is on the "we." That is, it is not enough that "I" truly believe and understand that I am coextensive with nature. Nor, is it enough that "you" believe this as well. Instead, it is an idea that must be accepted and integrated at most levels of sociality if it is to be truly efficacious. A key to overcoming this stark human/non-human dualism is, I hold, in conceiving of nature as a social institution along Meadian lines and applying this insight into the way we intentionally structure the education of our children.

The Self and The Social Institution

At the center of Mead's functional psychology is the idea that the self is fundamentally social. The development of the self cannot occur without the aid of others in society, and a community cannot develop without already realized selves. Society is the ground from which we learn to communicate, thrive, and be. But it is an unfixed ground—a ground that can be changed and manipulated by the acts of others. Thus, the self is constituted by its sociality; and society is constituted by these individual social-selves.

This co-constitution begins with, and is reinforced by, what Mead calls the "conversation of gestures." A gesture is the first phase of the social act. As Mead explains it, a social act is "in which one individual serves in his action as a stimulus to a response from another individual."[6] This stimulus-response relation is basic to even the earliest stages of animal interaction and is not particular to humans. In the beginning of an other's gesture we can already anticipate how the gesture will continue. We can then respond to this act which will in turn cause the original actor to readjust their intended action, and so on. The space or field opened by this interaction is what Mead means by the conversation of gestures. Thus, "The first function of gesture," as Mead describes it "is the mutual adjustment of changing social response to changing social stimulation."[7]

Through the conversation of gestures we have evolved the ability to abstract emotive meaning from the phenomena. We can abstract the actor from the object. The separation between actor and object is the very point upon which Mead places the development of the "I-me" distinction which characterizes the social self. In the field of gestures we find that our experience is one of both subject and object. There is the "me" which is the social object that acts and is reacted too. However, there is a part of

us that is prior to and beyond this socialization—the subjective "I." "The objective self of human consciousness," Mead elaborates,

> is the merging of one's responses with the social stimulation by which he affects himself. The "me" is a man's reply to his own talk.… The "I" lies beyond the range of immediate experience. In terms of social conduct this is tantamount to saying that we perceive our responses only as they appear as images from past experience, merging with the sensuous stimulation.[8]

The "me" is the social actor, but it always presupposes an "I" which is the very thinking of the "me."

Dividing the self into objective and subjective activities like this means that, "inner consciousness is socially organized by the importation of the social organization of the outer world." If Mead is right in this description, then the individual's relation not only with others but with the self is always a social relation, influenced by and influencing the social organizations that constitute an individual. The depths of this relation already carry with it the grounds for the ethical relation of the self to society. If we are to care for ourselves and our own well-being, then we are also going to have to work on the social organizations which structure our consciousness.

A social institution is, in its broadest sense, a "generalized social attitude." Mead continues this definition, "The institution represents a common response on the part of all members of the community to a particular situation."[9] We expect schools to educate and the police to protect.[10] Of course, these institutions can be approached from a variety of perspectives. A teacher responds to the school as a place of profession, and a student as place of learning and growth. Based on the individual's place in society, these responses can be predicted, to some degree, with knowledge of the value of the social institutions.

For Mead, social institutions are grounded in biological impulses.[11] Ethical valuation occurs when the individual feels an ethical obligation to a particular impulse as she becomes aware of the meaning of that impulse through conflict. This obligation demands a social manifestation. The meaning of the value is encountered in a problem or conflict, abstracted from this problem, analyzed, evaluated, and returned to the situation so that action can continue. In this manner, analysis of an immediate problem leads to the development of universal value assertions: everyone ought to act in such a manner. This is the sense of obligation. As Mead describes it, "obligation lies in the demand that all these values and impulses shall be recognized. The binding nature of obligation is found in the necessity for action and in the claim made by the whole self for representation within the action."[12]

The demand for recognition is encountered in two ways. The first is a demand implicit in the impulse itself not to be ignored by the individual. If we have an obligation to recognize our impulse towards preservation of our environment, then ignoring it would be tantamount to an immoral action. The second demand is made by the individual to the communities in which she participates. It is the demand that social institutions recognize the values found in the impulse. In this sense, the individual's obligation to her own ethical standards transcends the society of which she is a part. To

be clear, this sense of obligation arises only when a deliberate choice is made in terms of the values attached to the impulse. As Mead succinctly states, "obligation arises only with choice: not only when impulses are in conflict with each other, but when within this conflict they are valued in terms of their anticipated results."[13]

The obligatory act carries with it the demand to be recognized by the social institutions in which the individual participates.[14] Every value that is felt with it a sense of obligation is a compulsion to act. Further, "the compulsion of the appeal lies first in the location of these values in the relations of men to one another and to the nature that forms the environment of human society."[15] In other words, the obligation to the impulse must be understood in terms of the social institutions which "render serviceable" their meanings.

This framework of co-developing self and society through the mechanism of social institutions is ripe for addressing environmental concerns. There is perhaps an identifiable and unique impulse towards preservation and conversation. Let us call it the environmental impulse. The ethical value of the environmental obligation arises out of a biological impulse driving us to action and is not found as an inherent property of nature conceived of as an object.[16] Locating the value and meaning of nature in action avoids the dangerous reification that inevitably leads to the very dualisms which we are attempting to overcome. The value that nature has is, like all ethical values on this framework, grounded in the free and deliberate determination of individuals. Following what has been established, we cannot feel this obligation towards nature without also working with our social institutions and all other members of our society to give the strongest and most acceptable voice to this sense of obligation.

Understanding nature as social institution would mean to view our ethical obligations to the environment as arising from the interplay between the particular concerns of the individual and the society of which that individual is a part. Further, this approach establishes a framework for dealing with environmental issues that recognizes the root of those issues as a point of social concern interwoven with and entailing other social institutions. Finally, framing the environment as a social institution allows for us to attend to it as an integral part of the type of person that grows from our society. Such attention is best carried out through the institution of education.

Education and Nature

The general strength of a social institution can be judged on the manner in which it gives voice to a particular ethical impulse. With this in mind we can evaluate, debate, and re-valuate our social institutions. With regard to the nature we might ask: Does the current popular understanding of nature give full expression to the environmental impulse and accompanying obligations?[17] The expansion of a social institution is never enough on Mead's account. New social institutions must be formed in order to give full voice to an unrepresented or underrepresented obligation. From the functional system we have established, accomplishing this will be tantamount figuring out how we can have the response to nature become a part of the formation of the very self-consciousness of the members of our society.

One of the ways that this can be accomplished is through an approach to education

that emphasizes role of the natural environment. The end-in-view is to have the environment be so fully integrated into our society that we are not always consciously aware of our biases towards it. This goal can best be accomplished by paying particular attention to the educational experiences of our children. As Dewey points out, "the only way in which adults consciously control the kind of education which the immature get is by controlling the environment in which they act and hence, think and feel."[18]

Clearly, time does not permit a full examination of Dewey's theory of education. However, his understanding of both the formal and informal purpose of education as arising from the very act of living and interacting with the environment extends Mead's account of the social self. For Mead sociality begins in the conversation of gestures and it is in this space of shared meaning. It is in this space of action and reaction that Dewey notes the roots of education. Dewey suggests that "not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience."[19] To truly communicate meaning through action is to change and be change and this very changing is the "soul" of education. To more formally educate is to take this insight and formulate it into a practical social institution that deepens or expands the experiences and possible future experiences, of the student. Dewey continues, claiming "it may be said, without exaggeration, that the measure of worth of any social institution, economic, domestic, political, legal, religious, is its effect in enlarging and improving experience."[20]

Thus, for Dewey education is unavoidable for any form of social life. To live socially is to educate, to transmit cultural values through communication. For many societies this transmission is often unconscious, taking place through language and manners (minor morals). But, intentional or not, the, "social environment forms the mental and emotional disposition and behavior in individuals by engaging them in activities that arouse and strengthen certain impulses, that have certain purposes and entail certain consequences."[21] A child raised by athletic parents will have whatever capacities and impulses for athletics she has stimulated more, relatively speaking, than if he we raised by nonathletic parents.[22] As social institutions grow more complex, the space for an increasingly formal approach to education is opened. Formal education is the structuring of a specific social environment to help the adults control the growth of the mental and emotional dispositions of the young. This is not a way to train the young as one would train a dog, but to foster and cultivate those impulses and dispositions which encourage children to understand their connectedness to each other and, adding only slightly to Dewey, their "natural" environment.

We need go no further into Dewey's theories here to see that his approach to education is itself ecological and expands nicely on Mead's work on the social self and social institutions. From Mead we get the insight that the very structure of our inner consciousness is formed and formulated by the social institutions of our community. But we can, and do, learn to control both those institutions and the biological impulses which are their ground. It is not the impulses themselves that motivate us to approve or dissent to the various forms and functions of social institutions but the values and obligations that we feel towards certain impulses. If my society does not have a proper way to give voice to the obligation I feel to be charitable, then I am under obligation

to petition my society to help me form such an institution. To think of the environment as a social institution is to recognize that we have an obligation as a community to help give the impulse to preservation and conservation a voice. Understanding the environment as a social institution provides an account of nature as grounded in an active impulse rendering it continuous with and part of society. As such, it overcomes the unfortunate dualisms that plague other accounts of the world while at the same time providing a theoretical grounding by which we can use our environmental philosophy to effect real change within contemporary environmental discussions. And, it seems that one of the best ways of carrying this out is through education in Dewey's deep ecological sense. While, the practical nuances of how to do this still need quite a bit of fleshing out, the "pragmatic" result of understanding nature as a social institution is that we have new demands around which to restructure our educational institutions to cultivate members of society whose conception of the self includes the voice of nature. While this might sound like a draconian call for forced indoctrination, it should be emphasized that the individual has much to say over the social institution. Mead is insistent on this point, "Both must be there: the voice of the community and our own; the ordered community that endows us with its rights and its obligations, and ourselves that approve or dissent."[23]

What is needed for a "greener" world, in the poplar sense of being environmentally responsible, is to create communal and self-identity in which the very need for an argument for a "greener" world would be shocking. The very fact that we have an "environmental movement" demonstrates that we have not reached this point in our understanding, either at the individual or social level. Only until we treat nature as a social institution can we achieve this goal. The key to achieving this objective of understanding nature as part and parcel of our communal and personal identity is education.

Notes

1. Ari Santas, "The Environmental Value in G. H. Mead's Cosmology," in *Environmental Pragmatism*, ed. Andrew Light and Eric Katz (New York: Routledge, 1996), 80.

2. Craig Pittman, "Tea Party Members Tackle a New Issue: Manatees," The Tampa Bay Times, 12 July 2011, web. 9 October 2015. <http://www.tampabay.com/news/environment/wildlife/tea-party-members-tackle-a-new-issue-manatees/1180112>. Florida's more recent "Python Challenge" could also provide an excellent starting point for this conversation.

3. While most attempts at raising environmental awareness, the "green" movement for instance, are well-intentioned and (sometimes) well-planned they fail to reach the issue of identity that leads to the problem in the first place.

4. This is not to imply that there is no actual distinction between human society and the environment. Rather, we have formalized and internalized the relation as one of alienation. Nature is *Other*; it is that which is not us. Our political ecology hinges upon this reified dualism.

5. Belief here is best understood in the Jamesian sense. It is that which is at the root of action. When we believe that there is a division and that it should be overcome we act upon that belief. The manifestation of this belief in action takes on many forms, of course.

6. George Herbert Mead, "Social Consciousness and the Consciousness of Meaning," in *Selected Writings: George Herbert Mead*, ed. Andrew Reck (Chicago: The University of

Chicago Press, 1964), 123.

7. Ibid., 125.

8. George Herbert Mead, "The Mechanism of Social Consciousness," in *Selected Writings: George Herbert Mead*, ed. Andrew Reck (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 141.

9. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* Vol. 1, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 261.

10. We could also claim that we expect nature to be mutually sustaining. Of course, this claim is contentious and unclear. Such a lack of clarity further underlies the fact the environment is a social institution in a state of crisis as it emerges as a dominate form of thought we can see what it looks like for a social institution to be developed.

11. The basis of society, and thus the individual, in Mead's robust sense, traces back to basic biological impulses. Impulses are akin to instincts; the difference being that impulses are the root of personal and societal values. The charitable impulse, for instance, finds its voice in society's humanitarian organizations, while the violent impulse can be released in innocent sporting events, or more sinisterly in war. In this manner the impulses of the individual become the ground for social institutions. Societies grow and change in response to the ethical demands of its individuals.

12. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 262.

13. George Herbert Mead, "Philanthropy from the Point of View of Ethics," in *Selected Writings: George Herbert Mead*, ed. Andrew Reck (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 392-393.

14. Because all activity takes place in the field of gesture, an impulse's meaning develops when the action of the impulse is inhibited. The attachment of value to this meaning involves the use of reason and the ability to take the position of the other, both of these are established in the I-me relation of the social self. But, the values we give to an impulse cannot be derived wholly from the perspective of the individual. The individual self is a product of society. We come to understand the meaning of an impulse by taking the position of the "generalized other."

15. Ibid, 403.

16. That is to say, that the ethical concerns arising from the environmental impulse stem from ourselves and from our social interactions.

17. If not, how might we go about advocating and campaigning (not indoctrinating) for an expansion of the environment within the broader social conscience that might more satisfactorily give expression to the general environmental impulse?

18. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education,* in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924,* Vol. 9, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 22-23.

19. Ibid, 8.

20. Ibid, 9.

21. Ibid, 20.

22. Dewey uses a musical family as an example.

23. Mead, "Philanthropy from the Point of View of Ethics," 395.