

Response and Responsibility

Why should anyone bother about social or environmental problems beyond responding to the signals in society to behave in an appropriate and caring manner towards others? This is a conundrum which has repeatedly surfaced and continues to resurface in the literature on environmental values and more generally in political theory. That is, what is the responsibility of the individual to society, others, the unborn, non-humans or inanimate Nature? Or, to put the question another way, what is wrong with buying a sports car and increasing your fuel consumption further by putting the roof down and going for an aimless Sunday drive? After all we live in a society which spends billions promoting such activities as legitimate, self-empowering and economically desirable, and providing public support for the infrastructure and industry to make them feasible. Perhaps, if you feel some necessity to show your environmental concern, you might volunteer to buy carbon permits and make charitable donations to Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace and increase your personal warm glow benefits by advertising these facts with some suitable stickers on your car.

A common position from Australia to Japan and from America to Europe is that we should behave in accord with societal norms supporting ever-expanding wealth and development. As those norms are dominated by the market then the required response is one determined by the market. Hence, for example, Professor Lord Stern of Brentford can describe human induced climate change as the biggest market failure ever, rather than anything else. The implication is that the market signals need to change so humans can be made to give the right response.

This rather crude behavioural model of human psychology is now regarded as at the forefront of modern economic thinking, even though it fell from grace in social psychology many decades ago. Regarding humans as acting in accord with Pavlov's dogs makes economics much easier than trying to face the reality of humans as complex fallible beings. The right carrots and sticks will get the right responses, and if not then just repeat the incentives in more extreme doses.

The messages coming thick and fast are to do only what others are prepared to do and to care only for what pays a dividend. Even if the typical cost-benefit calculations might place intrinsic value in money, be divorced from welfare theory and lack ethical credibility (see Baum 2012), the basic approach is to be pursued. In this mode of thinking the correct response to resource and environmental problems is increasingly regarded as getting all of Nature into the economic calculus. Ecologists must argue for the economic usefulness of bits of the ecosystem and justify the economic worth of species. Bees must play their part in the global economy or like out of work labourers they are redundant. Unlike those labourers, they cannot retrain so their place in the world is forfeit to anything more valuable to the economy that can use their niche or the resource

base supporting them. The same goes for all genes, species and ecosystems. Use it or lose it is the modern motto.

In our modern economic utopia the rich should pay the poor to clean up the environmental mess, and take any necessary action for them, because this is the most efficient solution (i.e. cheapest). Burn as much fuel as you want and actually feel good about it because you are doing what a caring person should do, i.e., paying for the privilege within the market norms and creating a growth economy. Perhaps you don't need to pay anything extra, like buying carbon credits, because the benefits just outweigh the costs. So all those flights to Rio, or elsewhere, can be justified for no better reason than attending an important Green conference. That might also work for Green tourism. After all buying Green is already doing the right thing and that means you can buy more as well and feel good about it. Remember Nature needs a role in the economy to survive. We don't want those bees to become redundant do we?

Think of new ways to use honey and beeswax, use genetic modification and nanotechnology to give them new roles, extend copyright and aid their privatisation to make their use more efficient. Get lots more solar panels so you can use lots more electricity in the home and get an electric car or two, or why not three or four. Enjoy life to the full. Forget about your worries and your cares. The Green economy requires the Green hedonist.

This caricature is unfortunately not so far from reality. Booth (2012) shows that the most common recommendation to individuals for helping prevent climate change is to reduce personal greenhouse gas emissions via some fairly trivial minimal actions. She contrasts this position with the need for systemic change for substantive global emissions reduction, which implies activism on the part of citizens. She argues that this activism becomes a moral requirement when the alternative is standing by and observing the creation of harm. Even significantly lower or zero net personal emissions can then be regarded as an inadequate response. Yet, that one is not taking part in the creation of harm, but merely acting as a bystander, is sometimes justified in ethical discussions as a morally acceptable response. In contrast, Booth (2012) explores what might promote greater citizen activism and this is argued to raise a role for virtue ethics and require re-evaluation of what constitutes a good life. In addition, she is critical of the inadequate understanding prevalent about what motivates humans and points to the need for research on such things as emotions, empathy, competence, control, political and social factors.

Some contrasting lines of reasoning about what action an individual should be expected to undertake in the face of environmental problems are critically reviewed by Raterman (2012). On the one hand the argument goes that no action may be required by an individual because agreement on collective action is lacking. On the other hand the action by others has been argued to be irrelevant to an individual's responsibility to act. Raterman rejects the first position, but finds

EDITORIAL

he cannot accept the implications of the second. The potential for extenuating circumstances and high personal costs lies behind the latter position. However, as Booth notes with reference to the Holocaust, the majority of those involved in morally corrupt systems, even those creating serious crimes against humanity and societal harm, may just be undertaking mundane seemingly harmless individual actions while expecting that if they do not do them the personal consequences will be high e.g. being ostracised and themselves victimised. Raterman favours what he claims is a middle path, but one which involves personally challenging oneself continuously and, in fact, aims at ongoing self transformation. He mentions action being based upon non-consequentialist reasoning but including subjective and contextual factors, e.g. dependent upon financial and life circumstances with reference to Middlemiss (2010). What actions might be required, and on what grounds, as well as what lies behind the personal drive for such a transformative response, and might motivate broader societal change, remain open questions.

One action Raterman (2012) refers to as necessary is eating less meat, and this is a topic pursued by Nordgren (2012) within the specific context of human induced climate change. He shows that despite various complexities and disputed methods there is a significant case to be made for reducing consumption of specific animals (e.g. cows and sheep) in particular, but also meat in general. The latter is his favoured policy as technology alone is regarded as unable to provide an adequate response. Consumer responsibility is then called for but this is also seen as requiring 'political steering' and 'mutual coercion'. This returns us to some role for Booth's citizen activism, especially if we accept Nordgren's claim that politicians are captured by their previous value commitments to animal production. So another form of middle path arises here, one involving both bottom-up and top-down action.

In conducting this discussion Nordgren raises a concern for developing countries and he favours contracting developed country meat eating while allowing some expansion in developing countries (e.g., in face of the current consumption growth amongst middle classes), with the overall aim of convergence. This raises the debate over the need for differentiating responsibilities and so responses which might be expected from different social groups (e.g. poor, middle class, rich), economic systems (e.g. agrarian, industrialised, post-industrial) and nations (e.g., super powers, small island states).

The topic is picked-up by Karlsson (2012) who takes the claims of developing countries to increasing affluence as grounds for a controversial environmental stand. In contrast to the above authors Karlsson (2012) rejects ethically driven consumer constraint for anyone (rich or poor) and instead favours accepting trends in the current economic system as unstoppable and indeed favours promoting those trends to address environmental problems. His thesis seems broadly in line with the reasoning of ecological modernisation, although he

criticises 'piecemeal' versions. His technological optimism extends to space colonisation as the ultimate 'decoupling' of human economy and ecology. This radical alternative future is seen as no less unrealistic than the structural reform of global capitalism more commonly called for by many environmentalists and heterodox economists, amongst others. Perhaps this opens the door to a debate on alternative utopian futures which extend at least from communitarian dematerialised *décroissance* to technologically driven corporate world capitalism to economic growth without end.

Rather than the individual having a moral responsibility for action to control their consumerism or pollution Karlsson (2012) argues that developed countries have a responsibility to supply the developing economies with better technology to achieve 'sustainability'. He is critical of those he regards as promoting individual guilt, over environmental destruction, as a motive for action which he deems counterproductive to achieving new futures. Environmentalism is then criticised for promoting an end to capitalism which he regards as political suicide. Instead the radical response necessary is investing in 'breakthrough technologies'. Traditional growth and activities such as flying long distance (or driving sports cars?) are justifiable because of the long term potential for this speeding up the arrival of a low emissions technology and sustainable future world economy. The vision of universal affluence coupled with technology and accelerated globalisation is argued to be the most likely means to achieve a global transformation to sustainability.

Such traditional pro-growth techno-optimist positions are indeed the hope of many who see the juggernaut of industrial modernisation as unstoppable. Green growth is another version of the same reasoning (Spash 2012). There is no denial, by Karlsson or Green growth advocates, of the destructiveness of the current system, but rather a faith in the ability to redirect that destructiveness into more fruitful avenues using the existing institutions of a consumerist society and capitalist economy. As has been pointed out recently in the journal, in the context of climate change, technology as the solution is currently being used to argued in favour of geoengineering rather than less risky and technologically feasible, but structurally more difficult, options (Gardiner 2011, Preston 2011). Technology is also rapidly changing the boundary between Nature and human artefact as explored in the *Environmental Values* special issue on synthetic biology at the start of this year (volume 21, no.1). However what drives these responses seems to have little to do with sustainability or the complex of problems facing humanity. Technology is not the constraint on appropriate action. Addressing complex environmental problems as merely requiring better technical solutions fails to address the social, economic and political factors which are actually preventing the implementation of perfectly adequate and already existing technical solutions. Society then never addresses the real complex of

EDITORIAL

social ecological and economic problems and so these remain part of the system and its continuing and repeated failings.

Amongst the issues unaddressed is the shifting power basis within society from the public sector and central government towards the private sector and corporations. Mert (2012) provides a historical and institutional analysis of globalisation, the rise of corporate power and the changes this has brought in terms of the response to and responsibility for environmental problems and sustainability. The interdependence of environmental protection and liberal markets has become the accepted norm in global governance. Yet, despite the rhetoric of cooperation, Mert argues that the development of private partnerships by the United Nations lacks any specification of joint rights and responsibilities, and fails to ensure liability and compliance. Rather these agreements are primarily concerned with socially legitimising the role business and markets in governance. The transformation is towards deregulation, voluntary schemes, market-based approaches and non-state actor rule making.

Only those aspects of sustainability that are convenient for the private sector will be implemented by such an approach. The corporation as an entity with a perpetual life and rights more expansive than those of individuals is not merely, or even primarily, concerned about profits, but rather stability and survival and most fundamentally therefore power. Today the World Trade Organisation ensures that national legislation is overruled by new global rules whenever it obstructs capital mobilisation and transfer. Global law is then not an external constraint on capitalists but rather their own product in a new capitalist utopia. As Mert (2012) explains, this regime is reinforced by a narrative of the inevitability of globalisation (e.g., as accepted by Karlsson), while the myth of the self-regulating market maintains fragmentation of social and environmental legislation. Indeed, opposition to globalisation and the thrust of modernity is in this opinion futile. This further legitimises the increasing institutionalisation and normalisation of the corporation and markets as *the* social institutions around which society should be organised. The conclusion appears to be that humanity, if we can speak of such a collective, is entrusting the planet to the institutions whose survival depends upon increasing material and energy throughput, rapid societal and environmental change via technology, resource depletion, increasing pollution and making Nature into a human artefact.

In this new world order states are increasingly regulated by the institutions of market order. They no longer perform the role of counterbalancing disruptive effects of the market economy on society and the environment but act to facilitate the institutions of the market in maintaining their own control and dominance. The responsibility for addressing problems is dissipated and the response to approaching crises unlikely until substantive collapse. Unfortunately humanity is visibly struggling to act as anything like a responsible collective to address international and global environmental and resource problems, and

seems likely to continue to do so until the problems become an extreme threat, which is when the options will be most limited.

In terms of who is responsible and who should respond to environmental degradation and resource depletion there are clearly debates and divides evident in this issue of *Environmental Values*. Some call upon individuals to respond within their own self-defined abilities, while ignoring the powerful players in society and the need for structural change. Others recognise the need for systemic change and hope for civil society to act in accord with democratic principles. Those who regard this as too radical appeal to pragmatic use of the existing system in the hope this can be redirected without any fundamental reform of society or economy. What is commonly accepted by all is that environmental problems are substantive real issues threatening human society, and other life on Earth, and something must be done. Radical change is in fact inevitable because of the social and economic systems humanity has created. Rapidly expanding the number of people accepting responsibility for and responding seriously to the complex social ecological and economic drivers of our problems seems essential, but far from certain.

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