

Love is Green

Compassion as responsibility
in the ecological emergency

by
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Series on Climate Change and Society



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Acknowledgements

What I mean by love being green, as well as the obvious connection I make in this book between ourselves as enmeshed in ecological, green (and blue) systems, is that it is innocent, in the sense of wide-eyed and curious, like a child. I am well aware that the word used in that sense can be disparaging. But while compassion might seem on the surface to be anti-rational, and as Erasmus has it, a fool's game, most recent research is finding empirical support for the idea that love is inherent to our capacity to survive. It is also fresh, like new growth, and tough, in the sense that it is resilient, and demanding. All these come to mind when I think of being 'green', and I owe my own incipient investigations, and discussions, in this area, to my upbringing, with all its inherent contradictions. Thanks, then, to my family and to the Highlands of Scotland for the pageantry and the pain.

I started my PhD as a student of the late Dr Thomas Duddy, a poet and philosopher who worked at the National University of Ireland in Galway. I hope this book will spur an interest in his beautiful poetry. Tom introduced me to the work of Professor Paul W. Taylor who I contacted without any real expectation of response. He replied with generosity and brilliance in handwritten, insightful letters that were a joy to receive and that helped enormously in my attempts to understand, and re-imagine, biocentrism in the light of a systems-based approach. Professor Taylor died in 2015 and I hope that this book will in some small measure draw attention to the valuable work he undertook, and bring him more readers. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Graham Parkes of University College, Cork, an acutely sensitive and brilliant scholar of both Nietzsche and Dōgen. Professor Jason M. Wirth of the University of Seattle turned me towards Zen and I am deeply grateful: Gassho.

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Introduction

This book links two apparently distinct issues: moral agency, and the ecological emergency. It does this through exploring three themes: free will, the "good" of systems (and the practice implications of these), and compassionate attunement, with all that results from such attention. Put simply, and in the context of the ecological emergency, I propose that we revise our understanding of what we are, and are not, free to do. I argue that it is only by incorporating the fullest possible understanding, scientific and rational, of all that we are, that we can elicit the sufficient conditions to respond to the ecological emergency (a phrase I unpack briefly below, and in much more detail throughout the book).

I argue that, notwithstanding my own optimism about the resilience of our species, and my acceptance of the unpredictability of the future, the ecological emergency is the fundamental threat of our time. To respond requires a fundamental shift in perspective. If enough of us make this critical shift in how we understand ourselves, and if, as a consequence, we elicit compassion in response, rather than our current reaction to the emergency, we will shift the trajectory enough to mitigate some of the inevitable mass human suffering and systems collapse. The longer we continue to treat the ecological emergency as an external problem, the deeper the suffering and collapse will be. Ultimately, we will be left in a much more fragile state as a species, with less capacity to retain the key elements that make humanity humane. The emergency is in us, and we are in it, as Timothy Morton points out.¹

Our agency is the sense in which we are free to choose what to do, and our moral agency is the sense in which we are free to choose to do good, or evil (that is, to mitigate or to inflict suffering, deliberate harm or destruction). By taking what we know of evolutionary biology to its logical

¹ See Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Harvard University Press, (2010); in relation to explaining more complex features in terms of more basic features, see Edward Slingerland and Mark Collard, *Creating Consilience: Integrating the Sciences and the Humanities*, New York: Oxford University Press, (2011).

conclusion, that is, by taking a rational, scientific approach, we must accept that our current general understanding of both our freedom to act, and our separability from all else, is an illusion.

Therefore, I explore in detail what remains, if anything, of our agency, and in particular, what replaces our moral agency. I go on to explore the nature of systems of energy dissipation, which is one way of looking at ourselves in context. In the narrow corner of existence, here in the ecosphere, within which we live, have come into being, and are sustained, it makes sense to talk of "the good" of systems, including our own. Therefore the fact/ value distinction is an illusion, and there are right, and wrong, ways to act. However, I attempt to describe how different this approach is from conventional ethics. We only become agents by paying attention, because it is only through attention, or realisation, that we elicit the attitude - compassion - that allows options that are good for us to emerge, or become real.

"The ecological emergency" is a phrase that encompasses both the environmental crises of pollution, deforestation, desertification, mass species extinction, and climate change, and also the human attempts to conceptualise this impact. The phrase is controversial. Among those who deny that an emergency of any kind exists are fatalists who, arguing from "naturalistic" reasons, believe there is nothing to be done:

Humans' actions, regardless of their effect on other organisms, are natural and perfectly acceptable ... we should be allowed to live out our "evolutionary potential to [our own destruction] because this is "nature's way".²

At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe there is no crisis to concern ourselves with, and that any attempt to articulate what is happening as an emergency is overblown hysteria. The most recent, and perhaps most widely disseminated, articulation of this position is laid out in Steven Pinker's recent book, *Enlightenment Now* which dismisses the fears that climate change and other environmental threats are "existential".³ He cites a litany of examples that illustrate the human capacity for ingenuity in the face of resource depletion, and the slowing of exponentially harmful processes, like habitat destruction, when societies

² Richard A. Watson, "A Critique of Anti-Anthropocentric Biocentrism", *Environmental Ethics*, 5 (1983): 245–56.

³ Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, New York: Penguin Books (2018).

meet a certain level of prosperity for their citizens. His position fails adequately to acknowledge that the emergence of anthropogenic climate change continues despite attempts by governments to agree on globally applicable legislation. It does acknowledge, however, that Garrett Hardin's analogy of "the tragedy of the commons" has shaped these negotiations to date.⁴ As a result, globally, we face more extreme weather events resulting in mass forced migration with all the geopolitical and social instability that creates, and threats to agriculture and water supplies leading to food, and water shortages. These are in addition to the collapse of natural systems, from populations of insect pollinators like bees, to complex carbon capture systems like tundra and forests, on which human health and well-being depend.

There are, of course, also those who deny that any problem at all exists, or that we have any level of responsibility to protect and conserve other species or habitats, reduce pollutants, value biodiversity, or even see the threats to humanity as something we owe it to ourselves to address. This group remains averse to the notion that humans have any responsibility for the fates of other species. It depends on ideologies that have supernatural deities and magical thinking at heart. I will address the problems with ideological thinking separately. Here, I will echo the Scottish ecologist and pioneer of the conservation movement in The United States, in remarking, "the world, we are told, was made especially for man – a presumption not supported by all the facts."⁵

As governments and legislators begin to acknowledge the emergency, based on the vast consensus of scientific evidence, and work to formulate a response, conflicting approaches emerge. One approach demands that the nations that built empires during the industrial revolution be held accountable for their historical emissions, while others consider that only the contemporary situation matters.⁶ Meanwhile, among the populace, attitudes are becoming more divergent, and views on how, and whether or

⁴ Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons", *Science*, 162 (1968): 1243-1248.

⁵ John Muir quoted in Lori Gruen, Dale Jamieson and Christopher Schlotmann, *Reflecting on Nature: Readings in Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, (2012): 23.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/apr/21/countries-responsible-climate-change>.

not, to respond depend on people's underlying beliefs and ideologies, some of which are flagrantly anti-enlightenment.⁷

Attitude is the basis of action. Our propensities for valuing one set of responses over another (for instance those which prioritise equality over those that prioritise loyalty to a group) are largely intuitive, as Jonathan Haidt shows in his collated research. However, we are also capable of reflecting on the influence of intuitions, as well as that of vested interests.⁸ The pressure to contract the moral compass is huge, and again, we can look to Hardin for the analogy of a limited, or "lifeboat", ethic.⁹ This book will argue that adopting such an ethic creates less resilience, not more, among human communities in situations of crises, and that the non-dualist understanding of agency makes a persuasive case for the survival benefits of "the golden rule", and an extending of compassion, even in extremis. An attitude of compassion is, to put it simply, a better survival strategy than fear, both individually, and collectively. Love can be tough, as well as gentle. Elinor Ostrom's refutation of Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" does much to support this argument.¹⁰ Of course there are limits to the amount that any individual or society can give, but the non-dualist elicitation of compassion, tempered by continuous research and application of the science related to compassion in action, and applied equally to the self and to the other, provides an innovative basis from which to respond to the current emergency. We must balance the needs of the individual, the society and the broader systems within which both the former are couched, and we must recognise that the internal and the external worlds are far more intertwined than a technological, dualistic approach implies. This applies to our freedom to act as much as it does to what impact our actions will have: realisation as response, rather than reaction, is the only way we can shift the paradigm, and therefore the trajectory on which we are, collectively, headed.

This book is based largely on my PhD thesis, which was initially an examination of the theory of respect for nature laid out in the book of that

⁷ Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Roser-Renouf, C., Feinberg, G., & Rosenthal, S. "Climate change in the American mind: October, 2015". *Yale Program on Climate Change Communication*. Yale University and George Mason University, New Haven, CT (2015).

⁸ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, New York: Penguin, (2012).

⁹ Garrett Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor", *Psychology Today*, (1974), 800–812.

¹⁰ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, New York: Cambridge University Press, (1990).

name by the American philosopher, Paul Taylor.¹¹ Taylor took the Enlightenment ideas of Immanuel Kant, particularly the reasoned notion that we treat individuals as "ends in themselves" and extended the argument to include anything that could be said to have conditions that are "good" for it. Since all living organisms have conditions that are "good" for them, this led him to develop the theory of respect for nature, a rational basis on which to understand our obligations to other creatures.¹²

I began by critically examining, and revising, Taylor's thesis, and this led me to a broader, more relational, systems-based approach. I found myself having to revise what it means to be a moral agent. I went on to explore what "good" might mean in the context of systems, and the relationship between individual agency, or free will, and the notion of being entirely embedded in, or enmeshed in, and as, systems.

For reasons entirely beyond my control, including the untimely death of my original supervisor, the second half of my thesis broadened my exploration of realisation as agency. It came to include a phenomenological understanding of enlightenment, based on the Zen tradition of Dōgen Zenji, the thirteenth century Japanese Zen Master who turned the traditional idea of working towards this Buddhist notion on its head. His understanding of how to live an enlightened life, or even a life worth living, is outlined in the *Shōbōgenzō: Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, and it was to this text that I turned to unpack a deeper understanding of what it might mean to be an agent, if that meant paying attention first.¹³

Therefore, to a large degree, and mainly because of events that happened to me, rather than anything I was free to choose, my thesis, and therefore this book, became an exploration of the paradox of agency. My research began to bridge the apparently irreconcilable approaches of analytical, and phenomenological, philosophy. We have been led to believe, based on the hangover of Judeo-Christian and Cartesian worldviews, in certain dualisms (mind/ body; this world and the next; the spirit and the flesh). We can and should use reason, science, and the moral insights that an analytical approach allow to reconsider these dualisms.

¹¹ Paul W Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environment Ethics*, Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, (1986).

¹² I have chosen not to capitalise the word "nature" when referring to ecological systems and species, and to the natural world, because in doing so I follow the convention adopted by Paul Taylor.

¹³ Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō: Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, trans. Kazuaki Tanahashi. Boston: Shambhala, (2010).

When we do, we come to realise that the interaction between the internal and the external worlds is far more enmeshed than dualistic thinking can account for. This phenomenological, Zen-inspired insight shifts how we then interact. Such a shift requires a considerable effort of attention, particularly given the almost impenetrable dominance of the cultural paradigms of dualistic thinking.

Yet, we have the capacity to pay attention to our enmeshment and when we do, we can experience compassion arising from this attention. Compassion, or love as I call it in the title, allows options to emerge, to come into our awareness. In a sense, by paying attention, we become conduits through which compassion allows the good of systems to be realised.

The idea that allowing ourselves to attune to compassion is the central work in responding to the ecological emergency appears paradoxically ineffectual. Paying attention to the situation does not seem to offer us much in the way of action. Yet it is only through this realisation, along with a recognition of our non-dual nature, that we elicit the attitude which allows options to emerge that allow us to become resilient enough to mitigate the suffering we have caused. What is emerging, in this emergence, and emergency, is a challenge to develop an understanding of what compassion, or love, really means.

Summary of Chapters

I fear that by the time this book comes to publication, my defence of the phrase “ecological emergency” will be obsolete. There will no longer be a case to answer, because we will have incontrovertible evidence that climate change, pollution, habitat loss and species extinction constitute, by all measures, an emergency for our species, as well as for the majority of our co-evolved species, particularly vertebrates that require similar conditions for survival to ourselves. In the first chapter, I explore the various perspectives on the emergency. I give a brief exposure to the perspective of those who maintain that the whole notion is an invention by those who resent progress, and that the so-called emergency has been exaggerated, hyped up or even invented.¹⁴ I touch on the other end of the spectrum: that we are doomed no matter what we do.¹⁵ I spend more time

¹⁴ Andrew Chitty, "Ideology and Climate Change Convictions", *Climate Change and Humanities* conference, Sussex University, (Nov 2013).

¹⁵ Decca Aitkenhead, "Enjoy Life While You Can", Interview with James Lovelock, *The Guardian*, 1 March 2008, Environment Section, (March 1, 2008).

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