GREEN POLITICS AND THE TYRANNY OF THE THINKER

by Jeff Culbert

How can one exercise thought when it is necessary and not exercise it when it is not necessary?
-J. Krishnamurti[1]

Sometimes I think of human cognition as the ultimate environmental problem. It's a simplistic hypothesis, I know, especially in its failure to address the fact that some humans are more implicated than others in creating and perpetuating the mess. But in the context of questioning the viability of the species, it is not one to be lightly dismissed.

The hypothesis is not suggesting that human beings per se are the problem - that we simply took a wrong evolutionary turn and are now riding out some pre-determined Rendezvous with Destiny. But neither is it saying that it is time to discard our old theories in favour of a new, improved model of cognition which is about to roll off the theoretical assembly line. In fact, my concern is not so much with the *content* of thought as it is about thought itself.

The problem with thought is that it conveniently fails to notice itself most of the time, and when it does, it's more likely to yield paradox than it is to come up with something satisfying to the problem-solver within. The more common tendency is for the processes of thought to remain invisible, so to speak, as individuals and societies construct conceptual schemes, and live almost exclusively within the patterns of these abstract frameworks. Besides creating hierarchies of domination within and between human societies, our cognitive abilities are also said to distinguish us from non-human nature. But notice the revealing ambiguity here, because it implies both that cognition is used as the *instrument* of separation, the tool which creates a sharp human/nature distinction, and that cognition is used as *evidence* that the separation is justified. Clearly, there is a conflict of interest at work which should not go unnoticed by those who deal with broader issues of how human societies can fit into the non-human world.

Various groups and individuals are making explicit attempts to challenge the dominant assumptions about the nature/human relationship, and to bring this challenge into all levels of public discussion. But I have chosen to approach the issue of cognition from the perspective of Green politics, because I find Green parties and coalitions to be situated in a theoretically interesting space between the transformative sensibility which motivates them and the instrumentalism of party politics.[2] How they will deal with the strategic and theoretical issues with which they are now struggling will depend, I believe, on their implicit assumptions with respect to the proper role of human cognition.[3]

One way into the visions of the Greens is through the concept of decentralization, since Green politics can be seen as a reaction against the large-scale development and bureaucracy found on both the left and the right of the mainstream Canadian political spectrum. In spite of the differences in their preferences regarding the control of production and the distribution of wealth, proponents of the major ideologies have all promoted expanding industrialism and institutions which centralize power. According to the Green political perspective, this has been a human, social, economic, and environmental disaster, not only because of the specific practices that have been employed, but because of the very scale of these operations and institutions. Thus, a general decentralization is advocated, along with the promotion of increased self-sustainability in communities and bioregions, and a respect for bioregional integrity.

To portray the task of the Greens strictly in terms of instrumental changes towards decentralization, however, fails to do justice to their emphasis on the need for a change in sensibility with respect to nature. In attempting to play a transformative political role in this respect, Greens face co-option every step of the way, because the very notion of what counts as a valid

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argument must be part of the change. With this in mind, I have outlined below a series of conceptual traps which await the Greens and everyone else who is working toward a new relation to non-human nature. My suspicion, to make it clear from the outset, is that my opening hypothesis on the dangers inherent in human cognition must be taken seriously. Because humans have developed the capacity to live life in a hyper-cognitive mode, Greens should acknowledge and address what I call 'the tyranny of the thinker' as part of the attempt to find a less destructive way of life. What follows is not meant to discourage or criticize anyone who is making a sincere effort to address our socio-environmental problems, but to open up the discussion to include a perspective which is currently under-represented in the Green movement.

Trap #1: Reversing Dualisms

The history of ideas is full of examples of emerging schools of thought that championed the values which were suppressed by their predecessors, simply reversing a dualism which was in effect without questioning its validity. To give one example, the medieval scholastics, in an over-zealous interpretation of Aristotle, decided that quantification should play no significant role in understanding the world. They were eventually eclipsed by the all-stars of the scientific revolution, who declared - it's tempting to say 'inevitably' - that quantity was of *primary* importance, and that the qualities of the scholastic tradition were mere secondary characteristics of matter. Instead of being recognized as counter-balances to one-sided thinking in a particular historical setting, such reactions tend to be rashly embraced as the new truth, which quickly collapses into dogmatism.

There is a tendency, and perhaps even a need to build shells around new ideas, to protect them from challenge and ridicule from the outside and, most importantly, from one's own conditioning. But the danger is that these will harden in our minds into rigid principles or dictums which are applied mechanically. Perhaps it is the result of an inherited cultural bent toward psychological permanence - the infamous quest for certainty - that disposes us to create such thick shells around our ideas. What could be a temporary, biodegradable layer for protecting something flexible and organic becomes, in effect, a billiard ball, which competes with other billiard ball concepts for the available intellectual space.

Similarly, the decentralization which is advocated by the Greens could be hailed as a transcendent value in its own right, instead of a response to a culture of centralized giantism. In that case, 'small is beautiful' could be interpreted as 'the smaller, the more beautiful,' and upheld as a formula which can be applied more or less mechanically. But as E.F. Schumacher himself made clear in **Small is Beautiful**:

> Today, we suffer from an almost universal idolatry of giantism. It is therefore necessary to insist on the virtues of smallness - where this applies. (If there were a prevailing idolatry of smallness, irrespective of subject or purpose, one would have to try and exercise influence in the opposite direction.)[4]

Jonathan Porritt, in **Seeing Green**, elaborates on criteria of scale:

> Whatever size it is that takes away our dignity, makes us passive recipients rather than active participants, makes us dependent rather than self-reliant, alienates us from the work we do and the people we live with -*that* is too big.[5]

It is not so much the application of a concept, then, as it is a question of compassion, and attention to the *quality* of scale. Here Porritt is addressing social considerations, but the themes brought out concerning conceptualization and compassion can be further elaborated by considering our interactions with non-human nature.

Trap #2: The Search for Environmentally-Friendly Knowledge

Why do we want to 'protect the environment' anyway? For its own sake? For future generations? Because it makes good business sense? Because human survival depends upon it? These perspectives (and others) converge into a single dictum - Protect the Environment - but should this unanimity evoke in us a sense of optimism or suspicion? The danger in the unanimity is that the issues are confused by cross-reasoning, that is, the use of secondary reasons which make an argument more palatable, while de-emphasizing reasons which are much more central to the agents' motivations. Thus, in describing the 're-forestation' component of their operation, a logging company can rhapsodize about their spiritual attunement to nature and the imperative to respect the integrity of the forest, while really thinking more about the need to keep planting trees so that they will have something to cut down in seventy years. Conversely, an environment group may push for the preservation of a wilderness area in terms of its potential for jobs in tourism, while really meaning that destroying such an area is a crime against nature. So the apparent overlapping of ends - 'protecting the environment' - and the lumping

together of *reasons* for doing so is probably masking more fundamental issues.

It is more revealing to get at the second-order questions behind environmental protection slogans. Are we asking, "How much destruction must we inflict on nature?," or "How much development (i.e. destruction) can nature stand?" The former implies that we nurture respect for and compassion with the non-human world and work toward some reasonable minimum of human impact upon nature, while the latter implies that we still want to maximize production (i.e. destruction), but within the limits of sustainability, so that our asses are covered. Thus, the search for 'environmentally-friendly knowledge' must be questioned first and foremost on the grounds of the motivational assumptions behind it, challenging the maximization-of-production ethic as it arises, that is, before becoming entangled in technical arguments concerning where the 'sustainable limits' might be.

Also, the very notion of establishing 'sustainable limits' to production assumes that natural processes are so well understood that the consequences of disturbing them can be predicted with confidence. On this view, environmentally unsound practices of the past simply didn't get all of the data in, or they got it wrong, or they didn't care. But now, we are told, they *do* care, their research is extensive, and they work with teams of top environmental experts, using the latest techniques and equipment. Counter to this, however, is the view that large-scale disturbances have undesirable and unforeseen consequences, not *only* because of faulty planning or knowledge, but because no conceptual map of the natural processes in a given region could ever capture it adequately in a 'system.'

One could say that, in so far as a region can be represented as a system at all, in a mechanical model, there are invisible forces at work which thwart the ideal of ever attaining a model that is comprehensive. It is probably more accurate to say that a natural area is not such a 'system' in the first place, and that any attempts to portray it as such, while useful in limited domains, are necessarily reductions. This means that 'all of the data' could *never* be in, so claims to know the limits of sustainability are misguided or politically motivated.

Thus, the notion of knowledge acquisition for the sake of environmental protection must be questioned both in terms of the motivations behind it, and in terms of the limitations of human powers of knowing and predicting. What we have now is a drive to maximize production, and this drive is justified by the claim to know the limits beyond which 'serious' damage would be inflicted. As in Trap #1, the mistake can be seen as accepting the dominance of conceptual schemes over the Green virtues of respect and compassion. In this case, the human/nature relationship is cast in terms of a subject knowing an object, which is traditionally considered to be valid in so far as it is a detached, dispassionate relationship which precludes the experience of compassion.

Trap #3: The Search for Environmentally-Friendly Value Systems

The call to nurture compassion does *not* mean that we are in need of an ethical system which uses compassion as a fundamental concept. Whereas the notion of value remains an important one, the idea of value *systems* raises the same problems as conceptual schemes: they are cognitive maps, abstractions which we allow to mediate our experiences of the world.

It is beyond me why people feel the need to embrace moral principles and value systems in the first place; it seems like such a petty and egotistical way to live. However, if I say that some people *embody* certain values, that is quite another matter. I may even use the notion of a value system as a tool to articulate my appreciation for their way of life, but this does not mean that they embrace these values conceptually and act on them. In fact, if they did, what strikes me as spontaneous and beautiful would probably seem contrived and untrustworthy - another microvictory for the management paradigm in which thought commands action. Similarly, declarations that we must create a value system which includes non-human nature, while useful in limited instrumental ways, betray the arrogant assumption that we can formulate a set of values which envelopes and protects all of nature.

This is a conceptual attempt to bring nature

within the realm of human values, and its mirror image is the conceptual attempt to place humans within the realm of natural values. In **Nature's Economy**, Donald Worster points out the tendency to claim the 'discoveries' of science as an objective base from which to justify our moral or political views. The conceptual trick here is to determine what the world is really like (through 'value-free' science) and then behave in a way which is subsequently deemed 'natural,' whether it is acting as an autonomous individual in the free market system (suggested by atomistic mechanism), or by acting as part of a community having a life of its own (suggested by organic scientific traditions). The common assumption is that the facts of nature come first and the values of humans should follow from them. But this stark separation of facts and values is dubious, since values always influence the seeking and the finding of what we call facts, so Worster suggests that it would be more honest to lay these values on the table at the outset and say, "I don't know *why* I feel this, but I do". Then, according to Worster, science can be used to bring this moral impulse to light without being touted as its objective grounding.

Worster's argument addresses the scientific paradigm, but it holds for any form of knowledge which makes pronouncements about 'what is', so it has a much more general relevance. Regardless of the kind of knowledge involved, we are advised to be wary of the pattern of argumentation whereby codes of ethics or politics are derived from conceptions of nature, because "few ideas have been recycled as often as the belief that the 'Is' of nature must become the 'Ought' of man."[6] Many Greens advocate an 'ecocentric perspective,' which is the placing of the human good within the context of the greater good.[7] Worster helps to provide a warning for this project: that it avoid using objectifying conceptualizations as a means of achieving this placement of the human within non-human nature.

From this, I conclude that chances are slim that the problem of the nature/human dichotomy will ever be 'solved' by humans tinkering with such conceptions of themselves and of nature. If the cognition hypothesis is valid, then these conceptions may even be a part of the problem.

Trap #4: Trying to think our way out

The three previous conceptual traps all had to do with where the Greens will go for the intellectual tools with which they argue their case. The warning that I have offered is that if they allow concepts, principles, objective knowledge and value systems to override compassion, then the fundamental problem of the management paradigm remains unchallenged. I haven't defined compassion; in fact, I don't suppose that it would make any sense to do so, since that would imprison it in a concept and defeat the whole purpose. However, as a tentative indication of what I mean, I would emphasize its connection with direct experience over abstraction. There can be no sharp, oppositional distinction between thought and experience, though, because thought *is* a kind of experience, and much of our experience is mediated by thought. When I use the term 'compassion,' I associate it with experience which is not dominated by the thinking self, and not colonized by our theories, ambitions, fears, and conceptual schemes.

For some, this may sound suspiciously like the objectivity myth again: the idea that the patterns of nature can be mapped by a dispassionate observer. But objectivity is tied to a project of achieving a direct correspondence between the theoretical model and the reality, while compassion is about experiencing life, and not the creation and use of theoretical models. Objectivity involves the separation of subject and object, where an 'object' is a conceptual unit which is abstracted out of a world in progress. It satisfies our apparent need to identify, to categorize, and to achieve one kind of understanding, but this comes with a price. When this habit becomes entrenched as a world-view, then what suffers is the very ability to dissolve the subject/object dichotomy for a more connected and participatory experience.

The main intellectual reaction to objectivism was, of course, subjectivism (see Trap #1: Reversing Dualisms). A valuable lesson from this way of thinking was that experience tends to be mediated by thought in much more subtle ways than had previously been assumed. But out of this body of thought also came the much stronger claim that, because all knowledge is socially constructed, we have no direct access to nature at all. The social construction thesis is certainly a powerful one, but the denial of access to nature simply doesn't follow unless we are willing to define experience as essentially cognitive. It is the cognitive faculty (no pun intended) which is broadcasting the message that all is cognitive, so once again, a conflict of interest is apparent. I'd call it a case of having nothing to work with but a conceptual hammer, and wanting to treat everything like a nail.

Both of the schools of thought mentioned above concern themselves with subjects and objects, and hence privilege cognition and the thinking self. It is the habit of assuming that the subject/object distinction is fundamental which sets up the false dilemma of having to choose between objectivism, with its implicit cognitive imperialism, and subjectivism, with its implicit cognitive apartheid.

From the perspective of Green politics, the human/nature distinction is implicit in both the dominant attitude toward nature as a resource, and in the tendency to create highly controlled human environ-

ments which are 'on top of' nature rather than within it. Parallel to the need to problematize this distinction is the need to pay attention to the subject/object distinction, where the 'subject' can be understood as the thinker who affects the separation. If one's experiences are always mediated by thought as I have described it, then the separation always holds, because they are a thinking subject's encounter with objects. Thoughts from the past, with all of their inherent conditioning, are used to create expectations for the future, with the result that the present is rarely encountered with creativity and immediacy.[8] My opening hypothesis, that cognition is the ultimate environmental problem, may be a bit melodramatic, but the colonization of experience by thought, and the marginalization of experience which is not so colonized may well be key aspects of a more thorough understanding of the environmental predicament.

One interesting way of addressing the problem is provided by Dennis Lee, who approaches the human/nature relationship with an acute awareness of the role of thought in the matter. In order to speak about the nature-human relationship, it is common to dichotomize the world according to such sorting mechanisms as natural/artificial or wild/domesticated. In the most basic models, categories are seen as discreet boxes, with any given entity fitting into either one or the other. Thus a telephone is an artificial object, and the moon is a natural object. Another model is the spectrum, which offers *degrees* of change between the two categories. The waterways of England, for example, are artifacts in so far as they have been manipulated over the centuries, but we still feel that the Thames is basically a natural phenomenon, so we would want to place waterways somewhere between the two extremes of the spectrum. The key point is that we tend to want to locate entities somewhere, and decide what they *are* with respect to the proposed dichotomy.

In **Savage Fields**, Lee explores a dichotomy which is not a sorting mechanism. Everything which we encounter is *both* a concept which is assimilated into a world-view (the realm of 'world') and a part of that which defies conceptualization (the realm of 'earth'). Thus the telephone and the moon can be reduced to the concepts of world, so that we can know and use them. Or, as manifestations of something sacred and unknowable, that is, something outside of our reductive concepts, they can be seen as part of the unfolding of earth.

The importance of Lee's dichotomy is in how it challenges and limits the domain of cognition. By creating space outside of world (that is, outside of the 'world-view' world-view), he is opening up the possibility of becoming aware of thought as it arises, so that we are not enslaved to it, but can open up to experiencing earth. Lee's conclusion has the entirely appropriate

ring of paradox: "To think sanely must be to think against thought."[9]

This is not a call for the simple reversal of a dualism, with a claim that thought should be eliminated from our lives. But if the human/nature relation is indeed an issue which the Greens want to address, then a long intellectual tradition of splitting subject and object must be questioned, and with it the tyranny of the thinker as cognitive subject.

NOTES:

1. J. Krishnamurti, **The Awakening of Intelligence**, (New York: Avon Books, 1976), p. 19.

2. Kate Sandilands, "Ecology as Politics: The Promise and the Problems of the Ontario Greens," in W.K. Carroll, ed., **Organizing Dissent: Contemporary Social Movements in Theory and Practice** (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1992), p. 157.

3. For background on this issue in the context of Green political theory, see the exchange between Robyn Eckersley, "Divining Evolution: The Ecological Ethics of Murray Bookchin," **Environmental Ethics** 11:2 (Summer 1989), and Murray Bookchin, "Recovering Evolution: A Reply to Eckersley and Fox," **Environmental Ethics**, and 12: 3 (Fall 1990).

4. E.F. Schumacher, **Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered** (London: Sphere Books Ltd., 1974), p. 64.

5. Jonathon Porritt, **Seeing Green: The Politics of Ecology Explained** (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1984), p. 87.

6. Donald Worster, **Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 335.

7. See, for example, Robyn Eckersley, **Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach** (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), chapter 3.

8. This is the focus of much of the work of J. Krishnamurti. See, for example, **The First and Last Freedom** (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 1968), p. 285.

9. Dennis Lee, **Savage Fields: An Essay on Literature and Cosmology** (Toronto: Anansi, 1977), p. 111. In this book, Lee examines Michael Ondaatje's **Billy the Kid** and Leonard Cohen's **Beautiful Losers** using the dichotomy outlined here.

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