

Doctorate Research Proposal by Lauren A. Walker

Steps towards an Ethics of Relation and Action:

a comparative dialogic exchange between Buddhist and Western Phenomenology, paired with a study of the consequent moral and political implications—as framed by the context of environmental and social emergency.

Introduction

We are rapidly approaching a crucial moment in the human story; a cluster of impacts—many implicitly anthropogenic—are impinging upon the integrity of the biosphere. The European Environment Agency¹ has produced an inventory of 56 environmental problems, which besides climate change, includes ‘persistent air toxics [*sic*]’, ‘direct pollution (discharges, dumping) to sea’, ‘bioaccumulation (metals, POCs)’,² ‘loss of biodiversity and genetic resources’, ‘desertification’, ‘nuclear waste’, ‘risks of biotechnology’, ‘growing vulnerability of complex systems’. If effective action is not taken—and taken soon—human society will be heading into a very dark period, out of which it may not emerge.³ The above fact impules ethical questions, such as: how should we act?, what is the right thing? and, which good should we striving for? And although these questions have been posed for millennia, the enquiry seems, so far, to have failed to lead us into harmonious relations with the biosphere.

When, at the end of August 2018, the then French minster of state for Ecological Transition and Solidarity, Nicholas Hulot, stated that we needed to “change the paradigm”,⁴ he was pointing towards a dimensional shift, the depths of which have not yet been fully

understood. The scale of this necessary shift is also emphasised by Mike Berners-Lee,⁵ in his recent attempt at a big-picture view of the problem—where Berners-Lee places consciousness at the centre of a topography of change. To impulse the required change however, a rigorous theoretical support is required that can link the problematic of our environmental emergency with an ethics that impels the social and political change necessary to our collective flourishing. Where this flourishing is taken as being that of the biosphere as a whole, with no remainder.⁶ In other words, and in defiance of received philosophical wisdom, it seems necessary to establish a philosophical frame where an ‘is’ leads to an ‘ought’.

The proposed thesis assumes that the shift towards this novel frame, or paradigm, implies a consciousness change similar to that which Berners-Lee has identified. However it will argue that the precise topology of that change needs to be grounded both by the present problematic, and the articulation of an ethics which motivates—in a valid and reliable way—its unfolding. Two different questions may then need to be asked: (1). Can a foundation for an ethics of relation and action be abduced from the apparently dysfunctional collective regard we have toward this potential existential catastrophe? (2). By what means would such a re-founding effect the moral and political paradigmatic shift necessary to truly address and effectively engage with the approaching crisis?

A Two Part Structure

The framing problematic of the thesis will be elaborated within the introductions of each of the two parts, each essentially developing the themes outlined above. The social and environmental emergency we face necessitates a response through two dimensions which, it

can be argued, can be framed as the reflective and active aspects of a whole movement—the two parts of the thesis will treat these dimensions in order. In the introductions for each part, the framing problematic is effectively repeated, although through the iteration, differing aspects of the problematic as they relate to each dimension will be given focus. In brief, for *Part I*, the problematic motivates the subsequent exploration of an interior / phenomenological relation that will be developed in response—in the face of it, so to speak. For *Part II*, the problematic becomes an interlocutor, offering a basis for the judgement of the ethics of action therein developed, and which covers the moral and political domains. *Part I*, orients more towards the philosophy of criticism and deconstruction; whereas *Part II* elucidates a relation of another sort, one which, perhaps, tends towards the instrumental or analytical. This dual modality will be self-consciously elaborated in the thesis, reflecting the necessity of both aspects—understood by the thesis as the two parts that contribute to a further emergent level of view. The proposed thesis as a whole seeks to act as pointer towards that path which leads to the required consciousness / paradigm change.

The thesis will claim that the problematic of human societal dysfunction is evidenced by anthropogenic climate change and generalised global ecological degradation; also that the enquiry into the nature of this dysfunction will assume the first person phenomenological perspective, in general, as starting point. Dysfunction at the societal level, the thesis will argue, has a correlate within an individual's relation to themselves, to others and to environment. In general terms, the thesis, in *Part I*, will attempt to abduce a syncretic stance through a creative dialogue with the Western and Buddhist phenomenological perspectives. The enquiry into the framing problematic at the level of the person, then, is resonant with the engagement of the subjective through phenomenology, and more generally the strand of

Western thinking that Drucilla Cornell terms *The Philosophy of the Limit*.⁷ For Buddhism, it will be argued that the tradition is fundamentally phenomenological,⁸ in its focus on the achievement of a shift of view or consciousness; where this shift is seen to arise through a critical insight into the human condition, via an unflinching experience with the suffering of it—here the modalities of practice are also profoundly first-person. The inspiration that a shift of view can be realised through introspection, entailing a radical reorientation in exterior relationships, also resonates with Husserl’s project, which seeks to re-found philosophy in the establishment of that which is apodictic in experience. *Part I* of the thesis will seek to draw out, how the Husserlian praxis of *epoché* and Chinul’s *samādhi* and *prajñā* point to a unified co-arising movement, termed provisionally in the thesis as the *sublime-attitude*, and to be revealed through a syncretic re-framing enacted by the Western and Buddhist phenomenological dialogue. This *sublime-attitude* will be elaborated in *Part II* into a co-arising bifold dyadic relation acting within a holistic movement at the emergent level—this relation complex will be labelled the *respect–response* bifold relational dyad model or process.

- 1 “Appendix 1: An Inventory of 56 Environmental Problems”, Page, European Environment Agency, consulted le 28 juin 2019, https://www.eea.europa.eu/ds_resolveuid/PXSQ40CI3U. – the list does not mention human population growth.
- 2 POCs—Persistent Organic Compounds.
- 3 Human extinction remains perhaps an unlikely outcome, but a profound tragedy is almost certain. The notion of tragedy may be brought into the thesis, as John Foster brings the notion of tragedy to bear into environmental ethics: John (John Michael) Foster, *After Sustainability : Denial, Hope, Retrieval* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); John Foster, *Post-Sustainability : Tragedy and Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2018); John Foster, ‘On Letting Go’, *Global Discourse* 7, no. 1 (2017): 171–187. Also Simon Critchley has recently engaged with tragedy: S. Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us* (Profile, 2019).
- 4 Nicholas Hulot resigned from the government of Édouard Philippe live on French radio in 2018. Hulot’s act was a self confessed cry of alarm for more radical action towards the environmental emergency, and it remains one of the most significant political moments in the presidency of Emmanuel Macron. *Le Grand Entretien Avec Nicolas Hulot* (France Inter, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJZa90g9WSk&feature=emb_logo.
- 5 M. Berners-Lee, *There Is No Planet B: A Handbook for the Make or Break Years* (Cambridge University Press, 2019)
- 6 What I mean by ‘no remainder’ is that, within the context of flourishing as a whole, no particular within such whole should experience a decline. However that some particulars may experience unequal levels of flourishing, or that natural evolutionary processes may induce a decline is not excluded here.
- 7 Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 8 Dan Lusthaus has made an extensive study of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy through a phenomenological lens: Lusthaus, Dan. *Buddhist Phenomenology : A Philosophical Investigation of Yogacara Buddhism and the Ch’eng Wei-Shih Lun*. 1st ed. Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism Ser. London: Routledge, 2003.