

Values, Philosophy and Religious Studies.....

Dialogue

Australasia

Issue Twenty Three | May 2010



Teaching Environmental Ethics

How can today's teachers of Religious Studies, Philosophy and Values Education assist young people in making sense of their world, and how can we promote excellence in our teaching? How can we inspire in young people a yearning to seek out ways of engaging with moral and ethical questions?

We live in a world bombarded with stimuli, which could be seen as 'supercharged', leaving little space for experience of our inner world and contemplation. For many students, immersed in our web driven age of multi-media, any step away from this seductive and 'supercharged' stimulation is beset with resistance.

Yet despite all our multi modes of communication, the industrial and technological age has led us down paths of increasing disassociation and disengagement: politically, geographically, and spiritually. How do we respond?

The Journey

Do we hold the keys to help turn this around? Can disassociation be replaced with association, disengagement with encounter, over-stimulation with contemplation? Can we give young people back a sense of involvement, environmental sensitivity and responsibility? At risk of sounding corny, yes, yes we can! So, how do we translate this into the classroom context?

We can view the study of ethics as a spiral of growth, starting with the initial stimuli at the top:



Can disassociation be replaced with association, disengagement with encounter, over-stimulation with contemplation?

The Spiral of Ethics Education



Stimulus, Interest, Engagement



Opinion, Debate, Communication



Involvement and Community



Contemplation and Communion

So, we can move from the initial stimulus > interest > engagement > opinion > debate > communication > involvement > community > contemplation > communion > and on to the next stimulus and another spiral, and so on.

Stimulus, Interest and Engagement

The Initial Stimulus: The Medium

In light of our 'supercharged' environment, we need a powerful initial stimulus in order to set off on this considerable journey towards contemplation and communion, and to help overcome initial resistance, as mentioned above.

Ernie Christie says 'meditation is a prayer of the heart,' and I think we all agree that in the study of ethics, the heart as well as the head needs to be engaged. This emotional content also provides the connection between the end of one spiral and the start of another, between stimuli and communion. It is a direct and powerful force.

Films can convey statistics and information, but through visual and audio stimuli can pack a considerable emotional punch at the same time. Today's 'You Tube Generation' is well

in the study of ethics, the heart as well as the head needs to be engaged



versed and responsive to the transmission of ideas through the medium of film, and so it seems sensible to utilise this medium with its audio-visual power. But is this just adding to the current problem of over-stimulation? Yes and No. If a film is powerful enough in its emotional impact, it can be received by stunned silence. We know this from experience. It presents a window of opportunity to set off on the journey. In a classroom setting, the question is what then do we do to utilise this moment that provides us with such a gift – a gateway to contemplation and deeper engagement? *The clue is in the spiral.*

The subject matter is of course important, and this is where the environment, and the huge scope it offers, comes in.

The Initial Stimulus: Crisis as Foe and Friend

We are told our planet is in crisis:

Historians might come to view the first decade of the 21st Century as an exercise in terrible distraction: our overriding concern should have been climate change.

Jonathan Freedland, Journalist, 2009

Our ethical traditions know how to deal with homicide and even genocide but these traditions collapse entirely when confronted with biocide and geocide.

Father Thomas Berry, Author, UN World Charter for Nature

Reflected in the above quotes is the claim, increasingly made, that environmental ethics should lie at the heart of all ethical studies. If we think of the last line this makes sense. After all, if the ecosystems of our planet

implode, life as we know it will no longer exist. Presented in an arresting format, we certainly have the recipe here for interest and engagement.

The worldwide concern and debate over the destruction of natural habitats and the environment in general, actually provides an ideal platform to embark on the subject of ethics, with its wide media coverage and touching, as it does, all our lives.

Environmental Ethics can be approached from many angles: practical, existential, economic, political and spiritual. The raft of questions arising from debate can involve all.

We face a fundamental question, which can be described as both ethical and ecological. How can accelerated development be prevented from turning against man? How can one prevent disasters that destroy the environment and threaten all forms of life, and how can the negative consequences that have already occurred be remedied

Pope John Paul II, Addressing European Bureau for the Environment, 26th June 1996

Gaia, in the Ethics Online Environmental Ethics series, compares the astronomical age of our planet to the life of a 45 years old woman, and endeavours to contextualise humanity's place in the great scale of 'becoming'. It draws attention to humanity's meteoric rise to ascendancy – emerging as we did a mere 2 million years ago – compared to the age of our planet, 4,500,000,000 years old. In this 'lifetime' comparison, it was less than an hour ago that we learnt how to grow crops and only 30 minutes ago that we discovered the wheel.

The comparisons are shocking and demand attention. As humans we are put in our place, and into an enormously wide context. This takes us straight to the heart of questions beyond those of the immediate. In presenting such a sense of scale in understandable form, the wider concerns of ethics and the environment become alive, engaging and emotional.

Questions for the Classroom:

- Barak Obama's catch phrase is 'Yes we can'. Is this relevant to me? Is it relevant to saving our planet?
- An average Australian annually emits 23 times more carbon dioxide into the

atmosphere than an average African, 10 times more than an average Indian and 3 times more than a person in China. Why is this?

- What is happening to the Murray Basin? Why? Does it affect me?
- Action is the enemy of despair. What action? Is my action destructive or constructive? Do I care? What if I don't?
- What is the role of the Multinational Company: sociologically, economically, and environmentally?
- Ultimately it is you and I who represent 'consumer power'. If we don't buy, they can't sell, however big the company. This is an enormous power to hold. In light of this, what can increased self-sufficiency achieve?
- Is our planet really in meltdown? What do mass extinctions mean to me? Will I become extinct? Does the destruction of the rainforests matter?
- We strive for monetary wealth, we want the latest gizmo, we may campaign for equality and democracy, but what is any of this without a planet to sustain us?
- Why it is that only Homo-Sapiens has managed to foul its nest in such a short space of time?

Teachers have pointer questions such as the ones above with which to focus discussion, but if the initial stimulus has done its job, the students will be emotionally engaged, leaving the teacher to concentrate on guidance along the journey laid out in the spiral diagram.

The subject of the Environment is so far ranging that the pace along which the journey progresses can be adapted to suit any class. We can start with simple ethical questions of what can be done and do we want to, and if not why not, and progress through history, geography, anthropology, economics and politics to human rights, philosophy and the spiritual element. The ethical aspects of any of these components can be raised and explored by referring to the whys, the questions behind the information presented. Questions in turn can easily be extended



Action is the enemy of despair. What action? Is my action destructive or constructive?

into projects, such as on the Murray Basin - again looking at the whys, both historical and present.

Opinion and Debate and Communication

Communication is a preoccupation of our age, with so many methods on offer, but it is increasingly carried out in a semi-virtual world. Indeed, levels of both communication and community in the technological age range from the virtual to actual, from global to intimate.

However, an upside of this new access to information sharing is a sense of being heard in a society where this was fast becoming the preserve of the powerful and wealthy. We can use one aspect to counteract the other.

Being well informed on a topic helps us to form opinions, and here we have a topic with a wealth of information, a great deal of which is open to interpretation and opinion. These two factors put together form ideal elements for lively debate.

Debate entails active and direct engagement with other human beings, an ancient form of democracy where we can speak, and if chaired well, feel heard. It is a tool which facilitates communication and beyond that, can act as a precursor to deeper involvement with the world around us, learning to listen and be flexible of mind.

Involvement and Community

Community has also undergone rapid transformation, from reality through dissolution to virtual. And now? The evidence shows that the human psyche has always sought connection and meaning. We need each other and we need belief systems, but the state of our planet shows more than anything else, the utter failure of monetary wealth as a belief system. So, in the tale of the despoiling of our planet, lies a multitude of messages about greed, wealth, the need to share and compromise, survival and interdependence, stewardship, and ultimately - why we are here.

In order to fully engage with these ideas, we need to develop a personal sense of what this means, and how it affects us.

Questions for the classroom:

- Who do I talk to each day? Do I ask their opinion about things I care about?
- What do I care about? Does it affect other people: close and far away?

We need each other and we need belief systems, but the state of our planet shows more than anything else, the utter failure of monetary wealth as a belief system.



- How far does my community extend? Does it include the natural world?
- Do I feel part of a community? What is a community? Is my school a community?
- Who makes my clothes and electrical goods? Who grows my food? Am I connected to them?
- Would I campaign for what I feel is right? What about pollution and Fair Trade?
- Do I contribute to a community? How? Why? Am I needed?
- Can I really make a difference? Am I one of 'everyone'?

Contemplation and Communion: Beyond Ethics

Ethical considerations provide pathways into existential and religious exploration. In the case of the environment we have plenty of material, and it is pertinent for educators to consider how the Biblical injunction to have dominion over nature has historically been confused with an injunction to dominate. We cannot avoid facing up to the behaviour of a species that considers itself 'the crowning



A Project

Follow the chain of supply of an end product you use, such as a laptop. Start with the mining of the metals, then onto processing. What waste is created? Does it cause environmental damage? What happens to it? Who owns the companies? What is the workforce like? Then onto manufacture. Where and by whom?

In all, consider: what are the working and living conditions like? What pay and conditions of employment do these people have? What political and cultural regimes do these people live under? Do they have freedom of speech, equal rights, education? Compare each with yourself and your parents with these

workers and their families. Would you do their job? Would you or your family work for their pay? Would you live where they do? Always answer the question 'if not why not?'

Schools themselves are now aiming to move towards environmental sustainability. Something practical is on offer here, but who is dictating this move? If pupils embrace the need and drive the action, how does that feel? How does that relate to the ideas of community, communication and learning? How does that relate to the teaching of ethics? Perhaps we can offer something to get something: action, responsibility, respect, involvement.

glory of creation,' yet burns forests, sprays poisons, emits lethal carbons, pollutes oceans and shatters mountains. With the effects graphically laid before us, I challenge any class to remain impassive.

Whilst moving onto the philosophical and theological causes of our destructive attitudes, it is pertinent to consider the rise of movements that attempt to counter these destructive practices, with reference to Greenpeace, Survival, Christian Aid, Friends of the Earth, and national, regional or local initiatives. This offers opportunities for engagement - these are movements students can join and be active in if they so wish.

But we can also go back a long way, not just with ancient tribal peoples, but with the Christian tradition also. An example is the story of the Flood. When the waters recede, God makes a covenant with human beings and with all the creatures of the earth. At the heart of this covenant are precise instructions about caring for plants and animals, constituting one of the first manuals on sustainable living ever written, such as: 'to refrain from eating the fruit of trees for five years after planting' {Leviticus 19: 23-25} Such examples are plentiful.

It is not difficult to see how the questions so far mentioned can be steered ever deeper into the spiritual realm where communion may be practised in its broadest and specific sense.

We cannot learn if we don't listen, and we cannot enter into acts of contemplation. To listen to our inner world is the hardest listening we ever do. Contemplation is therefore the vital connector between communication and communion. Communion can be seen as an extension of community, a sense of belonging and meaning. In our increasingly disassociated world, something in us longs for this connection.

The global connection offered by consideration of our planet's environment, pollution and global warming etc, can naturally extend to considerations of the meaning of our life on this planet and indeed life itself.

Questions for the Classroom

- The First Law of Ecology is that 'all things are connected'. What does this mean to me? To what and whom am I connected? Does this include God?
- Some say Christianity has contributed to environmental disharmony but what of the principle of stewardship? Am I a steward? Find and discuss examples in Christian and other traditions.
- What is my attitude to non-human life? Do I see myself as part of nature or separate?



Ethical considerations provide pathways into existential and religious exploration.

To listen to our inner world is the hardest listening we ever do. Contemplation is therefore the vital connector between communication and communion.

• • • • •
Quotations for the Classroom:

Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its lifestyle. In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage that these attitudes cause. Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few.

Pope John Paul II, 1996

A human being is part of the whole called by us the universe. He experiences

himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest; a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness illusion. This delusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein

If we were built, what were we built for? Why do we have this amazing collection of sinews, senses, and sensibilities? Were we really designed in order to recline on the couch, extending our wrists perpendicular to the floor so we can flick through the television's offerings? Were we really designed in order to shop some more so the economy can grow some more? Or were we designed to experience the great epiphanies that come from contact with each other and with the natural world? Were we designed to witness the goodness all

around us, and to protect and nourish it? Just as 'the environment' is a context, not an issue, so is 'consumption.' It defines at the moment who we are - and who we aren't.

Bill McKibben, Christianity Today

So we come to the end of this whistle-stop tour of our 'Learning Spiral'. And perhaps here we should refer back to the bottom line and the importance of teaching Environmental Ethics: if we don't have a planet to live on, we don't live!

As far as action on the environment goes, we cannot order this motivation, this revolution, but we can certainly facilitate it.

Joe Jenkins, BA Hons, Cert Ed, MPhil

Joe Jenkins has taught Religious Studies, Philosophy and Values Education for 30 years. He is the author of many popular classroom textbooks and director of www.ethicsonline.net

Anita Jeffery, co-contributor to this article, is a Consultant to Ethics Online.





Detail from *because I said so*, John Hutchinson,
Sculpture by the Sea, Cottesloe 2010.

Teaching Environmental Ethics

Joe Jenkins – Hereford

Buddhism & Abortion

Damien Keown - London

What is Christianity and Why does this Question Matter?

Dr Peter Vardy - London

**Of Pets and Pests –
Women, Children and Dogs**

Dr Alan Cadwallader - Canberra

**Atheism and Spirituality -
The Problem of the Absent God**

Nikolai Blaskow - Canberra

The Classics: Portals to Transcendence

Duncan MacLaurin - Perth

Keith Ward in Conversation...

Keith Ward & Clare Saunders - Perth

Part 1: What is Postmodernism?

Andrew Wright - London

Part 2: Postmodernism & Religion

Andrew Wright – London



MediaCom
Education Inc.

Printed by MediaCom Education Inc.

Phone Toll Free 1800 811 311