Learning to Govern Oneself: Environmental Education Pedagogy and the Formation of an Environmental Subject

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A B S T R A C T

This paper uses the work of Weber and Foucault to explore the ways in which environmental education may operate as a site for forming and maintaining particular ethical competencies which most environmental educators argue are necessary in order to live in an 'environmentally sustainable' manner. Environmental education practices, as evidenced in the *Earthkeepers* program, are examined to show how environmental education may be working in quite particular ways to construct specific ethical abilities and competencies in students. It is argued that we need to be far more concerned with and aware of the *actual means* we use to encourage students to live in an 'environmentally sustainable' fashion

This paper offers a re-description of an environmental education program that will, I hope, cause us as environmental educators to pause and re-think the ways in which the pedagogies we use may actually be working to form and maintain students who are capable of and committed to living in an 'environmentally sustainable' manner. Foucault (1985) and Weber's (1930) studies, which clarify for us the ways in which particular practices and techniques have formed particular types of ethical beings (for Weber, beings with a 'protestant work ethic', for Foucault, the development of a particular sexual ethic), offer us, I believe, a way of 're-looking' at the pedagogies we use in environmental education.

My interest here is with whether such descriptions of the formation of particular types of ethical conduct, such as those offered by Weber and Foucault, have anything to offer environmental education. I have chosen to look at some of the exercises used in the *Earthkeepers* program (van Matre and Johnson 1987)[1] to see whether the sorts of practices and techniques identified by Weber and Foucault in their descriptions of the formation and maintenance of particular types of ethical beings, are also evident in environmental education. I do not wish to enter into a critique or validation of any of these practices and techniques nor of *Earthkeepers* as an environmental education program. My aim here is far more simple: to re-describe a pedagogical approach to see what issues such a re-description raises for environmental education generally.[2]

I have chosen to utilise the work of Weber (and Foucault whose notion of self-government, one could argue, builds on the work of Weber) since it is Weber who shows us how radical Protestants came to monitor and modify their own ethical conduct in a far more intense and systematic way than was ever required of them as Catholics. Protestants differed from Catholics in one fundamentally important way: Protestants were entirely responsible for their own salvation. Weber describes the (self-governing) practices and techniques that Protestants used to ensure their own salvation. He shows how, through the deployment of these very specific practices and techniques, a particular type of ethical being with a particular

type of 'work ethic' was formed and maintained. It was this very work ethic that then, co-incidentally, he argues, enabled capitalism to flourish. What I hope to show in this paper is that we can see, in the specific instance of environmental education looked at here, at least, a similar sort of work on the formation and maintenance of a particular type of ethical being.

As Hirst and Wooley (1982, p. 138) argue:

> For all the benefits of freedom of conduct or freedom from anxiety which stem from a decline in religious practice, subjects are no longer 'interpellated' as obligated to duty and charity. We face problems of motivating people to behave in altruistic and considerate, dignified, and conscientious ways without transcendental goals. This is not a matter of 'ideals' or 'morals' but of a daily practical mechanism of conduct, keyed-in to practices and institutions.

What I hope to illustrate in this paper is the ways in which certain pedagogies in environmental education enable students to see themselves as the subjects of ethical concerns and equip them with practical mechanisms of conduct that will allow them to live in an 'environmentally sustainable' manner. Thus, my concern is not with competing positions as *principles* of conduct but with the *means* by which we come to be, and come to see ourselves as, 'environmental'.

Environmental education and environmental conduct

Most statements outlining the purposes and goals of environmental education refer to the need to change 'attitudes' and 'behaviour'. For example, the Tbilisi Declaration (UNESCO-UNEP 1978, p. 3) states that environmental education aims 'to create new patterns of behaviour of individuals, groups, and society as a whole towards the environment'. In Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, we read that 'Education can give people the environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behaviour

needed for sustainable development' (Keating 1993, p. 57). Similarly, the most recent UNESCO conference on environmental education, held at Thessaloniki in 1997, states that 'Moving towards the goal of sustainability requires fundamental changes in human attitudes and behaviour' (UNESCO 1997, p. 1). There seems little doubt in these documents that changing the ways in which we conduct ourselves is the ultimate purpose of environmental education.[3]

While there is some debate in environmental education concerning the nature of the attitudes and behaviours that environmental education should 'give' or 'create'[4] there is little discussion about the means for doing so.[5] It is the purpose of this paper to offer one such explanation of the means (techniques and practices) for developing 'environmental' attitudes and behaviours in environmental education. I believe that Foucault's (1985) framework for describing ethical regimens addresses this question as it highlights the 'technical' nature of the relation between the principle (or moral code) and the actual conduct of our lives. His framework allows us to explain how some environmental education pedagogies work to incorporate a particular moral (in this case, environmental) code into the everyday conduct of their students' lives. The re-description I attempt here shows that current pedagogical practices in environmental education do indeed operate as mechanisms for forming and maintaining certain ethical competencies.

Ethical regimens

Many environmental education programs seem to assume a pre-formed ('good' / 'environmental') ethical subject and see the work of environmental education as the 'liberation' of this 'true' being. However, it may be that rather than 'liberating' an already formed inner being, the practices and techniques used in environmental education work instead to create and maintain a particular ethical subject. The outcome for both views is the same: an ethical being. However, the assumptions about how this state of 'being ethical' is reached, differ. For one, it is the pure and essential core of our human-ness, subsumed under years of cultural conditioning. For the other, even an essential core is a 'creation' using quite specific and identifiable techniques and practices.

For Foucault, being an ethical subject is neither simply a matter of 'unearthing' a true inner being, nor of complying with a set of moral values or rules. Rather, he argues that:

> There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without 'modes of subjection' and an 'ascetics' or 'practices of the self' that support them. Moral action is indissociable from these forms of self activity and they do not differ any less from one morality to another than do systems of values, rules and interdictions (1985, p. 29).

Ethical conduct, then, involves a set of techniques and practices for living in relation to a code. It involves both being the object of a moral code and seeing and conducting oneself as the subject of ethical work in relation to the code. Thus, while students may be the objects of the ethical concerns of environmental educators, the key issue here is how people come to see themselves as *subjects* in need of ethical work and, in subjecting themselves to ethical work, come to conduct their everyday lives through and in relation to this ethical work.

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Weber's (1930) argument is similar to Foucault's. His work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, was concerned not with the doctrines (or codes) of radical Protestantism but with the orders of living that accompanied these doctrines. He argued that each code has its own 'ethos' or way of ethical life, thus explaining how a sector of the population could come to see themselves as subjects in need of particular ethical work and through this work acquire practical techniques for living in relation to a particular doctrine.

Weber wanted to show how the ethical regimen that arose with Protestantism led to the formation of responsible subjects out of individuals. As he wrote: 'We are interested rather in ... the influence of those psychological sanctions which, originating in religious belief and the practice of religion, gave a direction to practical conduct and held the individual to it' (1930, p. 97). Weber shows that responsibility for ones actions, consistency of conduct, and an inward orientation, for example, are attributes that not all individuals have held at all times in the West. Rather, these ways of conducting oneself arose with a particular set of doctrines and practices. Thus, he argued that there are material practices involved in shaping the self so that it can bear a code. For Protestants, these practices included diary keeping, religious account books and timetables of one's daily activities. In this way, 'The moral conduct of the average man (sic) [is] thus deprived of its planless and unsystematic character and subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole' (Weber 1930, p. 117). All these intensely worldly activities and practices led to the shaping of an ethical self able to live according to the doctrines of radical Protestantism.

According to Foucault and Weber's views then, ethics is 'irreducible to the realm of ideals and values' (Minson 1989, p. 191) but relies on both mechanisms (or means, such as those provided by institutions) as well as practices for living

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according to a code. Such accounts of moral action and reflection do not, therefore, presuppose an already formed ethical subject.

Instead, Foucault identifies four mechanisms that were used for forming the self as an ethical subject.[6] The first mechanism involves the *determination of one's ethical substance*. Here, 'the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself (sic) as the prime material of his moral conduct' (Foucault 1985, p. 26). In this way, specific domains of conduct come to be regarded as areas of ethical concern. For example, one may see the practice of living sustainably as the strict observance of certain obligations or as the mastery of certain desires, such as the desire to consume beyond one's needs.

The second mechanism involved in the formation of the self as an ethical subject is the *mode of subjection* through which 'the individual establishes his (sic) relation to the rule and recognises himself (sic) as obliged to put it into practice' (Foucault 1985, p. 27). Here, ethical conduct is practised because one is part of a group that accepts the practice as custom (for example, for spiritual reasons) or because of one's own desires to live according to certain criteria. In the environmental sphere, this can be seen to occur when people identify themselves as 'environmentalists' and recognise obligations, for example, to 'live lightly on the earth' as part and parcel of being an environmentalist.

The third mechanism outlined by Foucault is that of the *ascetic practices of the self*. This is the work 'that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's own behavior' (Foucault 1985, p. 27). For example, one learns to be 'environmentally friendly' by regularly checking one's conduct in order to measure how precisely one is applying the 'rules' of living as an environmentalist. In other words, one monitors one's conduct for compliance with the code while at the same time recognising oneself as material to be worked on.

The fourth mechanism is *moral teleology* through which an action is not only seen as 'moral in itself, in its singularity; it is also moral in its circumstantial integration and by virtue of the place it occupies in a pattern of conduct' (Foucault 1985, pp. 27-28). Thus, while an action may be seen as moral in itself, it also 'commits' one to other actions which conform to this code. Moral teleology refers to both the regularity of the individual's moral responses and to the type of being to which the individual's moral actions are oriented. In this way, each environmental action helps one to recognise oneself as an environmentalist and to commit oneself to being an environmentalist.

According to Foucault (1985, p. 29), it is important to concern ourselves with 'the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object'. What then might the models and mechanisms be that are used in environmental education?

Practices in environmental education

The Institute for Earth Education's *Earthkeepers* (van Matre and Johnson 1987)[7] provides an example of an environmental education program that encourages each student to develop a relationship with themselves using techniques of self-reflection, self-knowledge and self-examination. It is my contention that many aspects of the *Earthkeepers* program reflect the four mechanisms for forming and maintaining the self outlined above. For example, one of the ways in which the *Earthkeepers* program encourages students to relate to themselves is through the use of texts which operate as functional devices for students' sensory or aesthetic experiences of the natural world. Students who undertake the *Earthkeepers* program have their own diary and this diary operates in much the same way as diaries did for Protestants, that is, as a record of moral conduct. In the *Earthkeepers* program, the diary records an individual's 'reconnection' with their true (and, it is assumed, already environmental) selves. The diary, through the opinions, advice and rules that it offers, acts as an example of the model life.

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Thus, the *Earthkeepers* diary can be seen as a technique for relating to the self, that is, as a 'conscientization' device. The *Earthkeepers* diary is subtitled 'a record of my relationship with the earth' and the introductory pages tell how often students should write in their diary - 'at least once each season', and what they should write about - 'the neat natural places I've visited and the new plant and animal passengers I've met' (van Matre and Johnson 1987, p. 56). The purpose of writing in the diary is also clearly outlined:

> ... [it is] to keep track of how I'm doing as an Earthkeeper. It helps me look at how I'm gaining new knowledge, experiencing the wonders of nature, lessening my impact on the earth, and sharing all of this with my family and friends. After all, an Earthkeeper never stops trying to be a better friend of the earth. ... I think you'll find that it helps you keep in touch with something that's very, very important - your relationship with the earth and all its life (van Matre and Johnson 1987, Diary, pp. 2-3).

The diary, in outlining the reasons for writing, along with when and what to write, acts to correct conduct that does not conform with the model proposed by the program. Indeed, not only does one come to model one's life through the writing of one's

life but this work is also never-ending: one is required to be constantly vigilant in this task of re-making oneself. Such practices are not exclusive to the *Earthkeepers* program with 'reflective practice', for example, a commonly used pedagogical practice in environmental education. Such practices allow one to structure one's life until one comes to live according to the structure – until it becomes an 'innate' habit.

The second mechanism outlined by Foucault is the *mode of subjection*. Here individuals recognise their relationship to the rule and come to feel obligated to put it into practice. The use of 'magic spots' in the *Earthkeepers* program can be seen as an example of this. As part of the program each student has their own separate 'spot' where they are able to commune with nature. This spot is kept for the duration of the program. According to the student's diary the magic spot is 'a special place for thinking, watching, listening, or just sitting' (1987, p. 4). The teachers' briefing sheet no. 3 says that magic spots 'provide the opportunity for each child to develop an easy, quiet relationship with one particular natural place', while the *Earthkeepers* training manual says that 'solitude, discovery, observation ... are all ways to experience the natural world' (1987, p. 21). However, we could view these practices of nature contemplation as techniques for determining one's own (ethical) relation to nature. In much the same way as the contemplative mode was used by the Protestants, so contemplation is used as a technique for seeing oneself as 'connected' to the natural world. The assumption underlying this practice in the *Earthkeepers* program is that a sense of connection will result in an individual who feels a desire to (or feels obligated to) live environmentally. So, the individual comes to recognise their relationship to the code and comes to feel obligated to put it into practice.

Ascetic practices of the self are the third mechanism involved in formation of the self as a subject of ethical work. Here individuals regularly check their conduct to see if they are living according to the moral code. Throughout the *Earthkeepers* diary are pages entitled 'How Am I Doing?' where students list what they have learned about how life on Earth works and how they have learned to become better observers of nature. They also list the things they have learned to do in order to have a 'better relationship with the earth' (1987, Diary, pp.14-18). For example, they are asked: 'Are you keeping up the good environmental habits you picked up?' and 'How is your relationship with the earth and its life growing?' (1987, Diary, p.19). These ascetic practices allow students to 'check' their conduct against the code. The diary concludes with further advice for ascetic practices of the self and outlines the type of being (an 'Earthkeeper') students should aspire to become:

> I hope you've continued using your diary. It's an important tool that all Earthkeepers should take with them whenever they visit a natural area. Spending time with the other things that share the earth with us is a big part of being an Earthkeeper, and your diary can help

you record those special moments. Don't forget to share the things you've written with your family and friends. It's important that everyone knows how we feel about the earth.

This final passage once again reminds students of their commitment to the moral code. This re-description of *Earthkeepers* illustrates some of the practices and techniques used to enable students to improve both their cognitive and affective relationships with other entities on the planet and to 'live more lightly' through building a sense of themselves as the subjects of environmental concerns.

Conclusion

What does a reading such as this offer environmental education? I believe that it offers a framework for examining the *actual means* through which environmental education works to form and maintain a particular set of ethical abilities and competencies. Furthermore, it points to a need for us to re-examine both our assumptions about our essential nature, and the claims we make about liberating the subject. As Rose (1999, p. 9) argues, '... concepts are more important for what they *do* than for what they mean' (my italics). If we are indeed in the midst of an environmental crisis then we do need to take seriously the *means* by which we come to conduct our lives as this will offer us opportunities for conducting them differently. Perhaps Foucault's reading of classical ethics and Weber's of radical Protestant orders of living can help us to see more clearly the practical mechanisms we offer our students for conducting their lives in an 'environmentally sustainable' fashion. 🖉

Notes

1 I have chosen Earthkeepers because of its explicit aim and specific techniques for working on a student's 'relationship with the earth' (van Matre and Johnson, 1987, p. 56).

2 I am equally not concerned here with ways in which students may or may not 'resist' the ethical 'training' to which they are being subjected through their participation in these programs. I am not interested in identifying whether such resistance occurs or with whether such programs 'succeed' or 'fail'. Rather, I am interested in re-describing the possible outcomes of quite specific practices and techniques that are currently being used in environmental education.

3 For an interesting discussion of goals in environmental education, see Robottom (1987a; 1987b) and Robottom and Hart (1993).

4 See, for example, Jickling (1992), van Rossem (1995), Jickling and Spork (1998), Sauvé (1999) and Huckle (1999).

5 See, for example, Simmons (1988) and Andrew, Jickling and Robottom (1996).

6 Foucault's discussion is of the ethical regimes of classical Greece. Nonetheless, I believe that his description offers us a useful way of understanding our work as environmental educators.

7 I want to re-iterate that *Earthkeepers* has been chosen here to illustrate a range of practices that are commonly used in environmental education, not in order to pass judgement on its merit as an environmental education program

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