

Eco-philosophy for children: a philosophical approach that reconciles us with nature

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Abstract: A development in our understanding of our own nature has implications at different levels. Of great relevance are the ecological consequences, considered of most importance for our future life on earth. For decades environmental ethics has been trying to find possible answers and solutions. An increasing number of ecological movements talk about the necessity of a deeper change, one which confronts the status quo and determines important changes in the way humans perceive their place and role in the natural ecosystem. However, the importance of children's role in this endeavor is neglected and reduced to simple approaches: spending more time outdoor and/or offering more theoretical lessons on biology. The content will show that children have the natural inclination, the inborn values and also the capacity to undergo a philosophical process for a deeper understanding of nature and themselves. This paper purpose is to underline the importance of children in the odyssey of change and the necessity of a philosophical approach. Equally, to show possibilities of practicing eco-philosophy for children that could represent a starting point for future initiatives in education.

Key-words: Philosophy for children; eco-philosophy; moral values; nature; anthropocentrism;

Respect for children's views - Children have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children seriously. (United Nations, The Rights of the Child)

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Introduction

I invite you to come together and open, yet again, the Pandora box of a class of problems that humanity is facing: the environmental issues and the pessimistic forecasts related to it. The current solutions to these are just not good enough for how critically serious the problem is. We seem to love nature more and more for its resources and become blinder to the effects of our own actions. An often-quoted solution is – let's go back and regain our connection with nature.

But why should we go back to nature? When and did we really leave it? If not, what is the root problem of all our environmental and social problems? Only with the right questions, we can find the right answer(s). In 2005, Richard Louv, in his book *Last child in the woods*, used the metaphor of *Nature – Deficit Disorder (NDD)* to help grow awareness of parents, educators and others, about an overgrowing problem: the new generations' disconnect with nature and its effects.

In the light of what the author himself warned, but also what the researches (Cornell University, ScienceDaily, 2020) around the issue have concluded, children's growing disengagement with the natural environment is prone to very serious effects in the future. These range from attention-span reduction, anxiety and depression to even a shorter life-span, compared to the previous generation. Of course, the reverse holds true as well and nature proved (American Academy of Ophthalmology, 2013) itself to be a great medicine. The effects of time spent outdoors showed benefits for reducing ADHD symptoms and anxiety, for regulating blood pressure, improving myopia and even an increased self-confidence. As a philosopher, I would add that this can also be an effective instrument for knowing yourself.

As time goes by and the Alpha generation (*kids born starting 2010, when apps were invented*) emerges, it seems that Richard Louv's alarm was valid. But was it complete? Elizabeth Dickinson, a business communication professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill raised an important critique to Nature Deficit Disorder theory and her view triggered the present paper and the angle from which we propose a solution. Elisabeth Dickinson calls NDD a misdiagnosis saying that it evokes "a fall-recovery narrative—that children are separated from nature and must return" and that this rhetoric can lead to a misdiagnosis and

wrong solutions. Her point was that as long as we understand ourselves from the dualistic relationship of human-nature, the solutions we will find will only blur the symptoms of a problem, rather than address its root issue. The theoretical approach, strongly dominating the educational curricula, is a false solution to our problem. I do not discredit science and its importance or usefulness, but it alone does not seem to be quite the answer for this much deeper challenge that we are facing.

The enlightenment rationalism positioned us as masters of this machine that nature is and which we can understand through the objectivity of science. We have the methods and the naming for all the species and sub-species. What solution can be better than that? But as a paradox, science led us even further from our natural environment: in an examination of US Americans' knowledge on climate change, Leiserowitz, Smith, and Marlon (2010) show that those with the most knowledge of climate change are most likely to deny climate change and therefore, less prone to take measures. Isn't that ironic? Therefore, we needed to search deeper for an answer, to learn from previous trials and find a possible solution that excludes at least the errors of judgement we have done until now. What we can conclude by now is that we need an approach that overcomes the human - nature duality that looks at human evolution from a non-anthropocentric point of view and integrates science without being reduced to science alone.

The Eco-philosophy movement fulfils many of the needed criteria, but an important observation is that it is limited mostly to an adult addressee. Which, as Elisabeth Dickenson underlined, is the result of a culture that is perpetually anthropocentric. If we start from adulthood, a reverse trajectory is not only an arduous demarche, but can prove to be impossible. Rather than trying to redirect the course of the river, what is needed is to go back to the spring, namely, the conditions we create for our children to discover their natural connection with the environment.

Combining the depth of *Eco-Philosophy* with *Philosophy for children*, is a way to create an effective instrument that enables the new generation to discover the laws of nature by themselves, as well as how intrinsically connected everything is. Let's call this new way *Eco-philosophy for children*.

Understanding Eco-Philosophy

It is debatable how far back we can trace awareness about the necessity of responsibly looking at the entanglement that Nature represents. The literature shows that the need of thinking ecologically emerged only a few decades ago. Nowadays, one would consider the subject easy in theory but perhaps difficult in practice, as the prefix *eco* is heavily used in everyday life, marketing, and social gatherings. For what concerns the second part of the eco-philosophy syntagm, *philosophy*, due to the complexity of its possible meanings and approaches, is possible to raise more confusion than clarity of what the concept means.

In the article "Promoting the Eco-Dialogue through Eco-Philosophy for Community", the Romanian author Vasile Hațegan brings clarity by distinguishing between (but not only) eco-philosophy and traditional philosophy. The role of the first stands out through orientation towards life and nature, in an actionable manner, with the purpose of creating awareness of the environment, of social responsibility and also of protecting the quality of life and the development of human and spiritual values of the person and community. Similar ideas are developed further within a wider array of counselling contexts in "Eco trends, counseling and applied ecology in community using Sophia" (Hațegan, 2021a, 2021b).

The ecology movement would also strongly disagree on an easiness of understanding and adopting the concept of eco-philosophy, as on its path it discovered that creating a philosophy and a set of principles that correctly cover all aspects of the environment is not easy at all. Our lack of experience in considering life non-anthropocentrically creates a number of difficulties. And it is not the words that are the problem but rather our capacity to understand its deep meaning and challenge our status-quo.

That is why in the last 40 centuries, ideologies that spoke about harmony between everything have not been harmonious with each other. Yet, the disputes between the ecological movements are not a waste of energy. These are rather an itinerary for our rational mind through which a deeper understanding of the human intrinsic connection with the environment can be reached.

Addressing the children

One element that unites the most important eco-logical crusades: the need of a change in mind-set that could lead to a change in culture and

therefore a premise for a healthier future. Still, almost none of them addresses children as a powerful resource for this change. Of course, they can be considered implicit in the discussion, but as Nature was an implicit value and yet an explicit approach was called for, so is the case of children. There is a need in addressing them equally and more directly and they will become a powerful ally. Until then, the lack of focus on children will only exacerbate the cultural paradigm in which we all function, with an erroneous focus on dichotomy, at the expense of complementarity. Although emotionally the society addresses children as the most important part of our society, the reality begs to differ.

In Romania, the political discourse is placing children on a pedestal, but the reality is that less and less money are spent for education, building schools, social programs for children or even health. Few examples: the number of children in pre-university education decreased by 14% between 2007 and 2017. According to an European Commission analysis, 38% of rural schools have outdoor toilets, without running water and sewerage, compared to 7% in urban areas. All these are mere results of an undergoing problem: the place of children in the cultural mentality and behaviour is very far from where it claims to be.

Similar with women, racial and ethnic minorities, differently abled, animals or economically disadvantaged people, children are subject to oppression, in a world dominated by adults and segregated by age. Children are asked to assume big responsibilities too soon and not of their choosing, while at the same time being excluded from meaningful social and political participation. They have very few legal rights and are rarely consulted in matters that concern their lives. Social restrictions take the form of protection, affection and assistance – a position that projects a fragile and incapable person. The oppression itself is hard to acknowledge and therefore hard to combat, especially when adults are convinced of their good intentions towards children. Political processes are seen from the perspective of adults and less focused on the impact upon children. The adult/child dichotomy will perpetuate injustice: adults are the ones with qualities and by comparison, the children are associated with the lack of them (adults are strong, powerful, have freedoms, children are small, vulnerable, inexperienced ...).

The liberationist approach opposes the protectionist one demanding an end to the adult/child dichotomy, but critics raise a question

mark concerning an outcome in which the differences between adults and children are ignored, reaching an undesired result – an age blind society. In order to create a strong sense of self and of the community, a child-centred social ethic should promote interaction, interdependence and collaboration, rather than isolation, independence and competition.

The Nature of Children

As we showed in the previous chapter, the children are left behind from many perspectives: justice, social, political, even education itself. Children's rights are a beautiful statement but practicing for a child-centred community is a difficult undergoing. This is due to the fact that the culture based on a child/adult dichotomy persists in our minds and old habits are deeply rooted in our consciousness.

Addressing ecological challenges faced by the world through adults is important but not sufficient. There is no flow, communication stops before reaching children as they are not included and invested with maturity to understand and come with solutions. Children are reconsidered when they enter adulthood but consequentially, after they have already developed in the same anthropocentric culture. It is a huge waste of time and resources which could be prevented. Modern studies about human nature reveal an inborn moral inclination in children which represents a hope for our ecological future, if only we would nurture this potential. A moral value which is to be found in children at earliest of ages, before education of any kind could interfere, is *compassion* as an inherent part of our nature. In his book published in 1759, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith, 2002), Adam Smith says:

How selfish soever man may supposed to be, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner.

BBC presents a study, *Are we born good or evil?* in which a long debated topic of moral is approached. Was Aristotle right when he said

that we are born as amoral creatures or Freud who considered new-borns a moral blank slate? The study showed not only that children are capable of moral judgement but also that they preferred the good over evil. The babies were shown two geometrical figures enriched with eyes who were climbing a slope on a mountain. One of them tries to push the other one down, each time it is on the edge of reaching the top. The action repeats a few times and at the end, the child is invited to choose one of the figures. All children, including seven month old babies picked the yellow triangle which symbolised “the good” in this experiment.

Other studies have shown the behaviour of children when they do not think that they are seen. They still acted with *kindness* and *altruism*. A study run in 2006 showed that children no older than 18 months are proactively helping others with their tasks, in different situations. The same results are validated when the person that needs help is a total stranger. Besides the moral compass, the toddlers also proved their *understanding* over other people’s goals and possible solutions. The children were willing to help even when this came at a cost to themselves, like abandoning a pleasant activity. The behaviour was not related to any reward and more than that, a decrease in motivation was observed under conditions of explicit reward and recognition (National Library of Medicine, 2006). Another research showed a preference for *fairness* in 10 - and 16 - months old children’s choices. They were presented puppet shows in which a lion and a bear distributed disks to a donkey and a cow. The lion (or bear) gave each animal one disk, and the bear (or lion) gave one animal two disks and the other nothing. At the end, the children were invited to pick the good one, and the 16 months children chose the fair divider over the unfair one.

What is Philosophy for Children

What is philosophy itself is not an easy question to answer, therefore philosophy for children can be approached from many angles. In the context of using philosophy for children with the purpose of forming an educated mind around global environmental problems it is important to present it as an inquiry process into general truths, made in a self-conscious manner. “What is Nature?”, “What is a Human?”, “Are Humans Nature?” are important root questions. When addressed through a

philosophical inquiry, they can expand our understanding of such matters and enable better decisions in the future. Philosophy for children is not an intellectual theoretical endeavour but a way of combining dialog with children, openness, and creativity, and direct them towards meaningful questions and answers.

Philosophy for children was the result of Matthew Lipman's dissatisfaction with the lack of critical skills he observed in students. An explanation for this could be found in Jean Piaget's theory (in 1933) that children under the age of 11 are not capable of philosophical thinking. Therefore, the educational system and society was acting in accordance with this theory, although it is difficult to point which was at the basis of the other. Matthew Lipman ignored this mental belief and understood that an early start is an important prerequisite which enables children and young adults to develop critical thinking skills.

Philosophy for children, or P4C, is an approach to teaching and learning in which children take part in philosophical enquiry. It enhances thinking and communication skills, boosts confidence and self-esteem, and improves behaviour and academic attainment. Used successfully in the last 20 years in Great Britain, philosophy for children's contribution was recently recognised in Cambridge Primary Review Trust's report (Sustainability and Global Understanding). The use of the dialogue and encouragement of critical thinking were appreciated in the context of focusing on global issues. This is very relevant for this thesis as it shows how important are the skills that are developed through philosophy for children for a global understanding of world's problems. Ruane et al's research results in 2010 showed that an appropriate pedagogy can enable children to engage critically with global justice issues, and also that with this premise in mind, it is worth to continue investigating on this path.

Children's and parents' views and attitudes on Nature

A questionnaire run with the aim of getting a better understanding of the children and their parents as relevant pillars of education and culture influencers offers us a couple of possible directions of action.

The questionnaire was structured in two sets of questions, one addressed to parents and another to children, to be answered with the help of parents. I received 62 valid answers from children aged 4 to 12 and their

parents and the results can be seen below. One important question which I wanted to verify was whether children have an anthropocentric view of the world. The key question for this was: *"Are Humans Nature?"*

The percentage of children who perceived themselves as being Nature is equal to the ones who said that they are not Nature. The results cannot be correlated with a lack of love towards Nature, as 100% of the children declared that they love trees and animals, and 75% were more willing to play outside than indoors. So, there is love for Nature and children do find pleasure in playing outside. Yet, there is an obvious tendency of seeing themselves as outside what they perceive as Nature. An intriguing result is the one we received when asking the parents about their view on Humans being Nature. The great majority answered that they agree or strongly agree. I grouped the questions that arise from this intriguing result, in two hypotheses which can be a starting point for further research:

a. Anthropocentric perception is an inborn characteristic of humans (and de-anthropocentricity an effect of education).

In order to investigate this path, attention should be given to answers by age, so that it can be possible to observe a change over time on how formal education prevails over the natural predisposition. Also, more factors should be put in balance and a parallel with parents' answers could be important.

b. Anthropocentric perception is not an inborn characteristic of humans but a consequence of education, born from the current culture and mindset.

From the way we live, children understand that we are a separate part of Nature. We raise our children to understand life in this way, not by what we tell them but by the way we live and what they can see independent from what they are told. Children learn about life in order to adapt their existence to the context they live in, long before a formal education begins. One question that we can ask ourselves is why our culture is not a consequence of our declared thought. As most of the parents answered that they consider Humans as being Nature, why would their way of living be different? The answer here is complex and has psychological and philosophical implications. The congruence between what we think, what we feel and what we do is a philosophical goal and the literature on the topic abounds.

On a more practical approach, a simple but eloquent study which was run a decade ago, tested what would people rather eat in a break, while attending an event. Most of the people answered that they would rather have fruits at the expense of chocolate. When the brake came, very few ate fruits, but chocolate was far from being enough. In our minds we wish to be what our consciousness dictates us as being good or appropriate. We wish to be our ideal projections, but we are not. A first step that could help would be to become aware of this gap and start analysing the consequences of the real behaviour and not of the projected self.

In any of the cases, the role of philosophy for children is of great importance as challenging the status quo is the first step towards change. We could also say, it is a closer step to an understanding which is more in line with actions and feelings.

Conclusions

It should not be a surprise that philosophy comes again in a time of affliction to rummage the human mind and challenge it to reinvent itself for a new evolutionary step. Eco-philosophy for children could be a solution for both our current and future environmental problems but it should not be the only one. Above all it is high time for finding solutions. Children are mostly exposed and vulnerable to the lacks in our educational systems, values and behaviours but at the same time they are the greatest resource of all. A resource that is not put to a good use for its own sake, nor for that of humanity as a whole.

Theunis Piersma, the author of the book *The Flexible Phenotype* spoke in a Ted talk about the naturalists as a species which is in decline and that it is enormously important to develop an ecological thinking to help regain the connection between nature and its components (living organisms). We, philosophers by name, passion or way of living, are all responsible to play an active role in challenging the current world view and enable change.

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