

Introduction to Human Ecology

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I've thought a lot about what I want to talk about this morning. In so doing, I oscillated between two extremes. Sometimes, I find want to tell you everything at once—all that makes this place wonderful and different and important. The rest of the time, I wonder why I should tell you anything. I've read your applications, and I know you all are, in various combinations, passionate and creative and smart and well prepared and alive and loving and feeling. So you'll all be fine.

What is human ecology?

So what I decided to do is say a few things about the academic philosophy at COA known as human ecology. This isn't the last word, by any means, on what human ecology is or should be, but they're ideas that I've thought about in my five years here, and I've found them useful as I try continually to figure out what I'm doing at the wonderful but different little college. Perhaps these ideas will be of some use to you as you begin your own human ecology journey. Or, perhaps you'll tell me in a few days or a few years that I've got it all wrong. Either outcome would be fine by me.

So, what is human ecology?

Don't worry about the definition

My first response is: don't worry about the definition of human ecology too much. It's something that sometimes first year students get angsty about, but there's no need. For one, there are lots of things that we study and strive toward that we can't define. But this doesn't invalidate these as ideas or ideals. For example, who can define how to be a good son or daughter, or a good parent, a good citizen, a good partner? But that doesn't stop us from striving toward these things, or making these any less real or important. Definitions aren't always that useful.

Also, almost all areas of study are difficult to define. Try coming up with a definition of mathematics, art, or poetry. But part of the problem is that these words—mathematics, art, poetry—are used all the time, while human ecology is relatively uncommon. So it's inevitable that you'll be asked what it is, especially by parents and friends at other schools. So one response is to turn the question around—tell your parents that you'll explain human ecology as soon as they provide a definition of art. This should buy you some time.

It's not a thing

A second point about human ecology. It's not a thing. In my opinion—one which is not shared by all at COA—human ecology is not a discrete “lump” of knowledge sitting out there somewhere. An essential part of human ecology is action: doing and making and changing, not just learning.

In this sense Human Ecology is like Nursing. The word Nursing is derived from a verb: an action. This suggests that nursing is an active process: it involves actually caring for a person. It involves agency; a person really doing it.

Accordingly, when one studies to become a nurse, one goes to a school of nursing, or a nursing department. Contrast this to other areas of study. People who learn biology don't go to a school of biologying. There's no verb form of the word biology. Similarly, you learn art at an art school, not a school of arting.

So I tend to think of human ecology like nursing—there is no human ecology without someone actually doing it. We should be a school of human ecologying, except that it sounds silly, and would be even harder to explain than human ecology.

So if someone asks you what human ecology is, I'd first try the trick making them define art before you'll talk to them. Once that gambit has run its course, you can comment on how human ecology should really be a noun form of a verb. And you could mention that noun forms of verbs are called gerunds, whereas adjective forms of verbs are known as gerundives. Gerunds and gerundives are the same in English, but they're different in Latin. This should cause enough confusion that the initial question about human ecology will be long forgotten, again buying you some time.

So, even if you still can't give a snappy definition of human ecology, you know what part of speech it is—it's a gerund!

One additional point about the similarities between nursing and human ecology(ing). Nursing is definitely about doing. But it doesn't mean that there's nothing to learn, or that you can just do any old thing. There are most definitely bodies of knowledge that you need to master to be a good nurse. But the point is to master this knowledge and then do something with it. Human ecology is the same in this respect. As Alfred North Whitehead says, "The aim of education is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge."

Action-Oriented

In determining what part of speech Human Ecology is, we've come across the first of four essential and distinctive features of human ecology. Human ecology is action-oriented; it's about doing. Human ecology at COA not only teaches students about environmental and social problems, but prepares students to directly address these problems, at levels ranging from local to international.

Interdisciplinary

The second important feature of human ecology is its interdisciplinarity. At COA we recognize that, in finding solutions to environmental and social problems, one usually has to use knowledge, methods, techniques, and skills from a range of disciplines. The environmental and social problems facing us are complex; no single discipline has the answer. Also, we expect that students will make connections between disciplines that we faculty could never make on our own. As such sort of interdisciplinarity is stronger than that of most liberal arts colleges.

For example, at the liberal arts college I attended, I studied literature in addition to physics and mathematics. But no one expected me to *combine* literature and mathematics. But that sort of combination, and countless others, happen all the time at COA. A particularly noteworthy example of this was one term when a former student, Rita Turner, took an advanced chaos math class from me, a class on video making from Nancy Andrews, and a class on curriculum design from a visiting professor. Amazingly, Rita used ideas and themes from my math class in one of the videos she produced and also in the high school English curriculum she designed. Rita's professors could have never made these connections.

So Human Ecology is strongly interdisciplinary in this sense.

Self-Directed

A third feature of human ecology is that it is self-directed. There are few curricular requirements. You will each consciously and reflectively design your own course of study. Your class choices will be yours, your internship will be yours, and your senior project will be yours.

But there's more to it than just having greater choice in your classes than you're used to. A useful metaphor to explore this idea is found in a passage from an Antonio Machado poem:

Wanderer, your footsteps are the path, and nothing more. Wanderer, there is no path. We make the path by walking.

At COA, and in much of life, there aren't always set paths; there aren't majors or tracks that you can plug into and then tune out. If we're going to truly wrestle with the problems of the world, we'll have to make paths as we go. And if our education is going to truly help us come alive—transform us so we can transform the world—we need to play an active role. At times, we'll need to make it up as we go along, and remember that moving forward isn't the same thing as moving straight.

Machado's poem could possibly be read in a way that suggests a certain individualism—that it's just you, alone in the cold world, boldly making a path somewhere. But I don't think this is what he means—Machado says “*we* make the path” not “*you* make the path”. And it's certainly not what I want to suggest. So if you're not a solitary learner moving through a void, what are you? What are you making a path through or in or with?

Some possible answers to this question are provided by Gary Snyder in his extraordinary essay, Tawny Grammar. He writes:

American society (like any other) has its own set of unquestioned assumptions. It still maintains a largely uncritical faith in the notion of continually unfolding progress. It cleaves to the idea that there can be unblemished scientific objectivity. And most fundamentally it operates under the delusion that we are each a kind of “solitary knower” — that we exist as rootless intelligences without layers of localized contexts. Just a “self” and the “world.” In this there is no real recognition that grandparents, place, grammar, pets, friends, lovers, children, tools, the poems and songs we remember, are what we *think with*. Such a solitary mind — if it could exist — would be a boring prisoner of abstractions. *With no surroundings there can be no path, and with no path one cannot be free.* [emphasis in original.]

I think that when COA is at its best, it’s because we’re providing all sorts of things to think with. We—the faculty and staff, but also the students—provide lush surroundings—gardens and jungles, forests and cities, fairylands and dreamscapes—through which you can make your own paths.

Values and Love

The last key components of human ecology that I wish to talk about are values; human ecology is a deeply value-driven endeavor. This is something that the faculty sometimes get uncomfortable talking about. But, in reading your application essays, it’s clear that you’re not uncomfortable

talking about values. Almost all of your essays touched on questions of value: morality, justice, fairness, right and wrong.

Nevertheless, values are tricky to talk about for several reasons. For one, it's hard to say where values come from. Is kindness biological? What is the root of empathy or passion or love? Is there a religious or a spiritual source to values? Many of us—particularly the scientists—come from academic backgrounds in which such questions are rarely raised, and almost never answered. As a result, we don't talk about values as often as I think we should.

But, at base, values drive much of what we do here. I think most faculty believe that COA is a good school; good in that it's a high quality academic institution, but also good in the sense that COA is a force for good and positive change in the world. This is why I chose to come here to teach. I didn't want to teach future engineers and doctors; teaching future human ecologists is, to me, a higher calling.

A second reason that values are potentially troublesome is that so many of them seem to be contextual or culturally dependent. This is a huge and difficult question, and I'll only touch on it very briefly. The dilemma is that once we allow that some values are different in different contexts, we may be tempted to slip into a nihilism in which relativism washes away all moral distinctions. But I believe that the choice between universal values and a nihilistic relativism is a false dichotomy. Donna Haraway argues this point forcefully in her essay *Situated Knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective*, admonishing us that “social constructionism cannot be allowed to decay into the radiant emanations of cynicism.”

Nevertheless, I think there are some statements of values or ethics or standards that are close to universal, in that they can be reasonably applied across cultures. One such statement is the Earth Charter, adopted last year by COA's all college meeting in this same room in which

we now meet. Another such statement is the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights.

An additional aspect of the value-driven component of human ecology is even more elusive and harder to find words for. It's characterized by a deep caring and a profound sense of responsibility for humans and the environment. This is stated nicely in the college's vision statement:

The faculty, students, trustees, staff, and alumni of College of the Atlantic envision a world where people value creativity, intellectual achievement, and diversity of nature and human cultures. With respect and compassion, individuals construct meaningful lives for themselves, gain appreciation for the relationships among all forms of life, and safeguard the heritage of future generations.

What is the value that's hiding in these words? I've thought about it a lot, and perhaps the best word for it is *love*, defined variously as "warm attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion", "affection based on admiration and benevolence" or "unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for the good of another."

Initially I was hesitant to discuss love in this way, but then I recalled a passage written by Paulo Friere in "Letters to those Who Dare to Teach" which has always resonated with me. Friere writes:

We must dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without the fear of being called ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not antiscientific. We must dare in order to say scientifically, and not as mere blah-blah-blah, that we study, we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body. We do all of these things with feeling, with

emotion, with wishes, with fear, with doubts, with passion, and also with critical reasoning. However, we never study, learn, teach, or know with [critical reasoning] only. We must ... never dichotomize cognition and emotion.

Like Snyder, Friere rejects the idea of an isolated, “solitary knower”, a “rootless intelligence”. A truly transformative education is one in which passion and intellect are joined and not segregated, in which critical reasoning is paired with love, not set in opposition to it.

Ernesto “Che” Guevara also writes of love. And like Friere, he also worries that it will seem ridiculous. As he writes in “Notes for the Study of Man and Socialism in Cuba:”

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality.

One must have a great deal of humanity and a strong sense of justice and truth in order not to fall into extreme dogmatism and cold scholasticism... . We must strive every day so that this love of living humanity will be transformed into actual deeds, into acts that serve as examples, as a moving force.

Justice and truth, fueled by love, transformed into action. Sounds like human ecology to me. (Perhaps Che should be on the cover of our next viewbook. How many pictures of Max Woodfin and his bike do we need?)

But what’s revolutionary about love? In brief, everything. For once you love something or someone: your parents, your children, or all children, the forest you grew up in, or all forests, or the planet, the question changes from “what will you do to protect it” to “what *won’t* you do?”

The CrimethInc collective, in their manifesto “Days of War, Nights of Love” discuss further

the revolutionary character of love. When listening to this passage, I think it's important to bear in mind simultaneously several different sorts of love, not just romantic or erotic love. So your sweetheart could be a man or woman you know, but it could also be John Coltrane or Virginia Wolfe, or your love of painting or gardening or mathematics, or your God or Goddess, or your love of Acadia National Park or your hometown. They write:

Falling in love is the ultimate act of revolution, of resistance to today's tedious, socially restrictive, culturally constrictive, patently ridiculous world.

Love transforms the world. ... In this sense love is subversive, because it poses a threat to the established order of our modern lives.

The lover can see that it might be more worthwhile to hitchhike to Alaska (or to sit in the park and watch the clouds sail by) with her sweetheart than to study for her calculus exam or sell real estate...and if she decides that it is, she will have the courage to do it, rather than be tormented by unsatisfied longing.

Love poses a threat to our political system, for it is difficult to convince a man who has a lot to live for in his personal relationships to be willing to fight and die for an abstraction such as the state; for that matter, it may be difficult to convince him to pay taxes.

For it is love that gives meaning to life, desire that makes it possible for us to make sense of our existence and find purpose in our lives. Without these, there is no way for us to determine how to live our lives, except to submit to some authority, some ... master or doctrine to tell us what to do and how to do it without ever giving us the satisfaction that self-determination does. So fall in love today, with

men, with women, with music, with ambition, with yourself...with life!

One might say that it is ridiculous to implore others to fall in love...it is not a choice that can be made consciously. Emotions do not follow the instructions of the rational mind. But the environment in which we must live out our lives has a great influence on our emotions, and we can make decisions that effect this environment. It should be possible to work to change an environment that is hostile to love into an environment that encourages it. Our task must be to engineer our world so that it is a world in which people can and do fall in love.

I hope that College of the Atlantic is such a world for you. Although we don't talk often about it this way, I think that's what we have in mind. Sometimes we talk about saving the world. But it's probably necessary to fall in love with it first.

So human ecology is many things in addition to being a gerund. It's human, humane, and humanizing. It's challenging, difficult, occasionally frightening, but joyous and hopeful all at the same time. Human ecology is a strongly interdisciplinary, radically self-directed style of education. But perhaps most importantly, human ecology is at its essence, a way of learning, acting, being, and doing that is based on a marriage of the strongest of our intellectual traditions with a deep, revolutionary love for all life.

Welcome to the College of the Atlantic, and welcome to Human Ecology.

Thank you.

References

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