
Environmental Concern as a Triadic System

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Summary

In this article I examine Frank Fisher's "three stages of environmental concern" and compare these with each of Charles S. Peirce's "three grades of clearness." The aim of the article is to provide a framework within which supporters of the deep ecology movement will be better able to distinguish between three progressively deeper levels of environmental concern: whistle-blowing; oppositional struggle (e.g., non-violent protesting); and deep ecology as enquiry. I argue that while each level of concern is necessary, it is only at the third grade of clearness, or stage of concern, that supporters of the deep ecology movement can effectively construct and communicate an ongoing community of deep enquiry for ecosophical living.

Our ability to create technologies has in recent times outstripped the earth's capacity to provide an *ecos* or home for them.¹ An emerging awareness of the social and ecological dislocations caused by modern technology has given rise to the deep ecology movement.² The deep ecology movement hopes to persuade the wider community toward recognition of environmental concern, and to take community-based action that will remedy the environmental dislocations caused by modern technology.

What method should be used to achieve the above aim when many of our present methods of "fixing" environmental dislocations are in fact causing them? For example, disruptions to natural systems often arise when our ways of thinking about nature, and therefore our ways of interacting with nature, become disconnected from the way nature

actually feels and behaves.³ If such disconnections go unrecognized, efforts directed toward reintegrating our technologies with nature will be misdirected. Indeed, such misguided remedial interventions can make the technology-nature disconnections we are concerned with worse.⁴ In short, our remedial efforts in relation to environmental dislocations are possibly being handicapped by “shallow” interpretations of what is really going wrong.

To assist us in the task of dissolving environmental dislocations at their deepest level, Fisher⁵ has suggested that three progressively deeper levels, or “generations of awareness” can be identified: first, at the *whistle-blowing* level, we establish an awareness of environmental breakdown; next, we formulate and legitimize *political or social insights* into the causes of the environmental breakdown; and, finally, if action at both these former levels fails to resolve the harm, we enter a level of awareness in which we begin to critically examine the very *ways of thinking and questioning* we use to recognize and remedy environmental dislocations.

According to Fisher, then, at the deepest level of environmental awareness, we investigate the very world views (values) that generate environmental breakdowns. We question our methods of reasoning, so these can be reasoned about, and modified. This enables us to dissolve the very conditions that give rise to environmental dislocations. In this sense, each of Fisher’s levels of concern represents a deeper and more developed interpretation of the ways of thinking and acting that cause environmental dislocations, and each deeper level therefore leads to a distinct style of remedial intervention.

In this article, I want to critically examine Fisher’s three levels of environmental concern and link them conceptually to what the logician Charles S. Peirce has called his “three grades of clearness of thought.”⁶ My aim is to show that it is not only possible to identify three distinct levels of environmental awareness, but also that these levels of concern can be related to three qualitatively different logical categories, which Peirce called respectively: the monadic grade of *feeling*, the dyadic grade of *conduct*, and the plural grade of *thought*.

Why should the above task be of interest to supporters of the deep ecology movement? While Fisher has recognized three levels of progressively deeper awareness, he argues that each level of environmental awareness arises out of the failure of solutions attempted at the preceding level. Peirce, on the other hand, argues that the *logical* relations between his grades of clearness arise in a precisely contrary manner to that proposed by Fisher. In Peirce’s logical framework, the most adequate level presupposes the recognition of a lower grade,

making the first category of feeling the deepest level of concern. Further, for Peirce, all three grades of clearness are necessary for attaining an adequate approach to human-nature interaction. In other words, for Peirce, each grade of clearness presupposes the attainment of, rather than the failure of, the preceding grade of clearness, making the deepest level of awareness a *direct* (i.e., an experientially derived) recognition of environmental harm.

I have undertaken the present task within a context of deep ecological thinking because it is through our interpretations of environmental harm that the need to maintain a socially mediated identification with nature arises.⁷ Thus, in order to correct the shared errors in thinking and acting that lead to harm, we must be able to return to the source of our assumptions, and revise them in the light of a direct experience with nature. As such, even our most deeply held spiritual assumptions are not held to be axiomatic. Rather, they too are evolving. If we are to evolve with nature, then, our thinking must be as free as the thinking of the beings with which we co-exist.

Success in environmental communication, therefore, should be measured in terms of how well our method of enquiry links us to natural systems, especially to systems that we are unable to observe and interact with unless we discover a method for making such interactions possible. In other words, for Peirce, enquiry is an *erotetic* process: it comprises an interrogatory relation of *both* deep questioning and deep answering. At this level of concern, our interpretations of nature help us see what ought to be the meaning of these interpretations if their usefulness for resolving environmental dislocations is to be realized.

The only system that can put remedial actions of the above kind to a test is the system that made the dislocation evident to us in the first place—nature. My overall purpose in this article, then, is to show how Fisher's three stages of environmental concern can be linked to Peirce's three logical categories to yield a *recursive system for deep questioning*. As such, a triadic system of environmental concern combines Naess' concern for deep questioning with his concept of a "relational, total field" approach to environmental concern.⁸ Each stage (or grade) of questioning is necessary to the overall process of recognizing environmental dislocation, analyzing distinctly what it is that makes the dislocation problematic, and then working in a manner in which our thinking and actions are made adequate to the task of collaborating with nature.

It is within the above general context that I will next investigate each level of the triadic system of environmental concern in detail. My argument, in line with both Fisher and Peirce, is that our interactions

with the environment should ideally attain the third grade, or level, of concern.

1 Whistle-blowing

Fisher calls the first stage of environmental concern whistle-blowing. This is also the realm of Peirce's first grade of clearness, the grade in which simple qualities of *feeling* are prevalent. In this stage, something is experienced by a person and is called a problem. Initially, therefore, the environmentalist's concern is purely an experience linked to a word or idea to which the experience familiarly applies. In the present context, the experience is familiar enough and clear enough to be recognized and linked to the term "environmental problem."

In the above sense, and as Douglas and Wildavsky⁹ have argued, environmental problems may at first appear to have been randomly selected. There are an infinite number of concerns the environmentalist might potentially choose from. I say "potentially" because whether or not the selected problem is an imaginary problem or a real problem is, at the whistle-blowing stage, a largely pointless question. This is because the subject matter of the environmentalist's concern, at the whistle-blowing stage, has not been socially recognized. The whistle-blower's concern relates to a *potential* existence, and as such, it has no *actual* existence. In other words, the concern has not emerged as a social reality, because it has not yet been connected to anything we already know that would oppose it. For example, at an organizational level, we may find that there are no procedures to deal with the whistle-blower's concern, because, as yet, the problem does not exist, except in the experience of the whistle-blower, who feels the concern.

The whistle-blower's concern, then, in the first grade of clearness, is primarily hypothetical. Whistle-blowers want it understood that they know that something is wrong, and that their hypothesis potentially explains a surprising observation. Thus, even though the whistle-blower may have connected the problem experience to a set of events by researching the concern at an individual level, the concern cannot be recognized by others in this same sense—it has not been recognized at an organizational, or community level.

Indeed, if the environmental whistle-blower overextends the patience of an employer or regulative organization at this first stage of concern, the environmentalist may be told that she or he is "imagining things." This is perhaps why in a recent Australian survey of the public sector's response to whistle-blowers, 22 per cent of the 72 whistle-blowers

surveyed said they were compulsorily referred, “to a psychiatrist, and in some cases to a psychologist, social worker or other professional.”¹⁰

In sum, in the first stage of concern, the experienced concern is treated as a personal opinion lacking a shared community reference. If a community of enquiry does not form around the concern, the environmental dislocation that is the object of concern will continue uninterrupted, and the whistle-blower will be ignored, or perhaps even actively suppressed.¹¹

2 Struggle!

In the next of Fisher’s stages of environmental concern, environmentalists begin to gain support for their claim by searching out the technological or social structures that they think cause, or are responsible for, the problem of concern. Thus, in the second stage of concern, environmentalists attempt to have the subject matter of their concern recognized at a political level by the action representatives of society. To do this they use of a number of oppositional methods, for example, protests, boycotts, non-violent resistance, education campaigns, and so on. Environmentalists aim to involve others with their concern by having the structures they have identified as implicated respond to their claims. The responses centre on what are usually called “the facts,” and as such, the oppositional method and subsequent responses map out a definition of the problem.

As contested facts of existence, *two* subjects define these sites of resistance. There is both something with intrinsic value, and something reacting against the way the whistle-blowing environmentalist believes the facts to be. Peirce called this grade of clearness “the category of *struggle*.”¹²

Dualistic distinctions permeate the second stage of concern, and, as a consequence, environmentalists at this level tend to frame their concern with either/or arguments. Such arguments are usually constructed via a rhetorical strategy in which, of two polar choices, one leads to an irreparable environmental loss, the other to a major environmental victory.¹³ We might also note, then, that at this second stage of environmental concern, the feelings of the environmentalists are typically seen to be the subjective side of the opposition, while the stronger party appears to occupy the objective side of the conflict.¹⁴ The oppositional dualism is based on a power relation, and therefore solutions at this level of concern tend to stimulate further protests or remedial “fixes,” creating a pattern of displacements in which each subsequent act of opposition simultaneously creates its own locus of

resistance, transforming every subsequent victory, or loss, into yet another displacement of the original concern. The environmental concern becomes centred upon who wins and who loses, rather than how we should act on the basis of our ideas in future.

In this stage of environmental concern, then, the feelings identified in the whistle-blowing stage are taken to be existentially first, while the identified causes of the concern are argued to be existentially second. What is first is about to be lost, never to be restored, thus the environmental slogan, “Act now before it’s too late!” Put in terms of Peirce’s categories, we say that the first grade of concern (feeling) is logically presupposed in the second stage of concern (struggle).

As Fisher notes, arguments based in the second stage of environmental concern therefore usually only succeed in a very limited sense.¹⁵ The environmentalists may protest their concerns successfully, perhaps winning battle after battle, but these victories only serve to displace the concern from one physical, temporal, social, or ideological context to another. Thus, while whistle-blowing and protesting may succeed in drawing attention to, and defining the problem in structural and/or political terms, we find that the concern is structured in communicational terms as an environmental debate. The objective of a debate is to defeat an opponent rather than mediate a solution that genuinely satisfies both sides reciprocally in a collaborative manner. Put another way, the purpose of a debate is to make known (i.e., to legitimate) a particular view of nature by means of persuasive techniques that do not require a direct dialogue or mediated contact with nature.

Politics is not corrupted by the above style of sophistical communication; rather, it is *constituted* by it. In other words, the ideal of deep questioning (i.e., finding out the truth) is abandoned in favour of other ideals, often without any recognition that this has happened. A concern for the subject matter (the environment) can easily be lost sight of at this stage.

3 Social action as deep enquiry

In Fisher’s third stage of environmental concern, a mediate realm of thoughtful action emerges. In Peirce’s terms, rather than focus on what has been made clear, we examine what ought to be the meaning of the concern if its true usefulness is to be fulfilled. In other words, we evaluate the idea that represents our concern by testing it in the real world. Thus, the third stage of environmental concern incorporates the feelings of the first stage, the dualistic struggles of the second stage,

and a level of concern not covered by feelings or struggle. Peirce¹⁶ called this third grade of concern “thought,” but for reasons that will soon become apparent, I will call this third grade “deep enquiry.”

In the integrated framework I am sketching here, each stage or grade of environmental concern presupposes the previous stage or grade. Thus, at the third level of concern, environmentalists unite two distinct styles of communicative action within a third mediating system of critical awareness. Any disparity between the concern identified at the whistle-blowing stage, and the concern defined by the dual forces of existence identified at the stage of struggle, is a motivation for further enquiry. Thus, it is through enquiring into the issue as a community of concern that something independent of our social expectations (i.e., the *intrinsic* value of nature) can be brought into a meaningful relation with our established ways of interacting with nature, and experimented with to obtain a truly co-operative relation. In other words, in the third stage of environmental concern, we take the general principles operative in nature seriously enough to consider the consequences of taking action on the basis of our reasoning about them.¹⁷

The distinguishing feature of deep enquiry, then, is that it is experimental. If we act on the basis of our thinking, we are connecting our feelings to the struggles of existence, and acting “with-in” thought. Thought, then, is never a thing in itself: it represents something else to us, for some purpose.

To illustrate how this might work, let us consider the environmental issue raised by the possibility that legal standing can be granted to environmental objects, such as trees.¹⁸ To enquire into this issue involves not only conceding that trees “speak,” but also that their speech can be heard by a human.¹⁹ This move would represent the first grade of concern. Next, a group of people embody this feeling and protest the concerns of trees in the forests. In this second stage of concern, someone, let us say a logging company and its associated political allies, takes an oppositional view, and in doing so regards the voices of trees (as represented in the bodies of the protesters) as something to be silenced. In doing this, the oppositional forces in fact uphold the “unthinkable,” that is, they take action to suppress the rights of something categorized as “rightless.” This reaction therefore constructs a definition of what is commonly called “an environmental problem.” In the second stage of concern, then, politicizing what was considered unthinkable is made doable. Those involved can save themselves from the dilemma this creates (conservation or development) by denying that any connection between peoples’ feelings and trees exists, or, alternatively (and here we enter the third

level of concern), the wider community can concede the possibility that trees have rights, and consider this as a *provisional* conclusion. Several alternative paths of action then lie open to choice, and the community is now free to enquire into the possible future consequences of taking the voice of trees seriously.

Built into the third level of concern, then, is a possible future relationship between people and nature. Nature, when seen as “property” in this sense, is a concept involving the negotiation of power, and this is why we can, if we want to, legitimately specify concepts that create a relationship between humans and nature, such as “privilege,” “obligation,” or “responsibility.”²⁰ In contrast, ideas such as “wealth,” “asset,” or “resource” are characteristic of second-stage thinking: there is no common obligation implied, only extensions of the concept of personal ownership. Similarly, direct perceptions of harm to the regularities of natural systems are characteristic of first-stage thinking, and as I have explained, these are not taken seriously until given existence by the second-stage of concern.

Conclusion

To review briefly, in the first stage of environmental concern the greatest emphasis is placed on the feelings associated with an issue of concern. In the second stage, the feelings of concern are given existence in the mode of dualistic struggles, often expressed in terms such as “the conflict between nature and development.” In the third stage of environmental concern, experimental reasoning becomes predominant. At this level of concern, environmentalists work to foster a co-operative community in which we investigate or enquire deeply into the consequence of our ideas.

Having examined Fisher’s three stages of environmental concern, we have also found them to coincide satisfactorily with Peirce’s three grades of clarity: the monadic grade of feeling, the dyadic grade of struggle, and the plural grade of thought.²¹ I undertook this task to show why Peirce and Fisher’s process distinctions might have relevance for environmental activists, especially environmental activists who subscribe to the platform of deep ecology. The analogy I have demonstrated shows how a community-based approach to environmental dislocation requires the blending of all three levels of concern into a triadic system of ongoing deep enquiry.

Society needs to feel nature as if feeling nature were something that really matters. Society also needs its doubters and negators in order to embody the concerns we call “environmental problems,” that is, to give

our feelings of concern existence at a political or legal level. Most of all, however, both society and nature need environmentalists who can recognize that deep enquiry is a life-preserving instinct. As Peirce explained, evolution has provided us with a natural instinct to pursue the truth of things within a community committed to the pursuit of the same ideal.²² We might call this quest of quests science, or perhaps, if the reader prefers, thoughtful community action. Either way, it is only through the continuous process of deep enquiry that feelings and struggles can get tested and revised in the light of our experiences as a community—a community of enquirers living with-in nature.

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Notes

- ¹ Fisher 1989.
- ² See Dregson 1997.
- ³ Naess 1986.
- ⁴ Fisher 1990.
- ⁵ Fisher 1988; 1989; 1990.
- ⁶ See Peirce 1955; 1960.
- ⁷ Naess 1973.
- ⁸ See Naess 1973.
- ⁹ Douglas and Wildavsky 1982.
- ¹⁰ De Maria and Jan 1997, p. 48.
- ¹¹ Martin 1999.
- ¹² Peirce 1997, p. 149, my emphasis.
- ¹³ Cox 1982.
- ¹⁴ Low 1996.
- ¹⁵ Fisher 1996.
- ¹⁶ Peirce 1997.
- ¹⁷ Peirce 1997, p. 193.
- ¹⁸ See Stone 1972.
- ¹⁹ Kvelson 1999, p. 157.
- ²⁰ Kvelson 1996, p. 65ff.
- ²¹ Peirce 1997.
- ²² Peirce 1997.

