

Against enlightened inaction: Edification from Thoreau

This essay describes and critiques a phenomenon it terms ‘enlightened inaction’. Despite abundant information regarding the human causes and ultimate consequences of ecological devastation, many individuals act as if they were ignorant of these facts. This essay argues that knowledge puts individuals on notice of their ethical responsibilities and binds them more closely to ecological obligations. To advance this claim, and to explore how individuals might act upon these obligations in their own lives, the essay turns to the ethical and ecological thought of Henry David Thoreau (1817–62). Thoreau’s practices of self-accounting, deliberate living and simplicity supply individual tactics that might complement, rather than undermine, institutional thinking and collective action on ecological issues. In light of Thoreau’s example, the essay also suggests that while all individuals have basic obligations in respect of their awareness of the ecological effects of their actions and ways of life, academics have special obligations in their capacity as public intellectuals.

“The actual alternative to deliberate acts of individuals is not action by the public; it is routine, impulsive and other unreflected acts also performed by individuals.”

(Dewey, 1954: 18)

There may have been a time, perhaps not that long ago, when most individuals in developed countries could plausibly claim ignorance about most of the ecological effects of their ways of life. If ever such was the case, it clearly is no longer. Rather, information about the consequences of human activities upon the ecosphere is now so plentiful, so robust and so emphatic as to be, at times, confounding and overwhelming. We – by which I especially mean residents of the global north – know what at times feels like too much. Surely this contributes to many of the forms of scepticism and recalcitrance regarding our individual and collective implication in various ecological problems, and about the ethical as well as causal responsibilities thereby entailed. My aim in this essay is to sketch and critique a phenomenon that arises under just such circumstances: when we know a great deal about an ecological problem, enough to

know it is a problem and enough to know what are at least some of its human causes (even when there may also be non-human causes), and yet despite this awareness, we do not act in ways that our knowledge patently recommends. I will call this phenomenon *enlightened inaction*: we see the problem, and our role in causing it, and yet we live as if we remained ignorant of these connections, thereby evading or denying responsible ecological citizenship.

A considerable portion of humanity is implicated in this phenomenon, though certainly not all who are implicated are equally so.¹ Human beings are parts of nature, even as we are separated from one another by various human artefacts and practices (e.g. languages, built environments and patterns of production and consumption) and even as the collected uses of our cognitive and practical capacities have ostensibly distinguished humans from other parts of the natural world. To live on Earth is to contribute every moment of one’s life to its condition, and thus to bear an unsought and ineluctable share of responsibility – both causal and ethical – for the same. Enlightened inaction is thus one of our truly common problems, and overcoming it is one of our truly common

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tasks. Yet I suggest that there is somewhat of a sliding scale of ethical responsibility generated by ecological knowledge, according to which, all else being equal, those with more extensive and privileged access to such knowledge bear greater ecological obligation. Thus, for instance, academics (as both researchers and educators) bear special obligations to serve as exemplars.² As those whose vocation it is to amass and disseminate knowledge about the ecosphere and how humans belong to and affect it, we bear a higher burden of demonstrating practically the consequences of that knowledge.

To make my case, and to suggest general ways in which one might live up to such obligations, I shall look to Henry David Thoreau (1817–62). Long recognized as one of the first truly ecological thinkers (Hyman, 1962), he furnishes a valuable image of ecological citizenship in action. By way of his example, I shall make some tentative suggestions of how we might turn towards ways of life that are more aware and responsible.

Enlightened inaction

Optimism about the efficacy of knowledge as a spur to action has deep roots in Western thought. Whether or not the views were strictly his own, several of Plato's dialogues, for instance, express confidence that knowledge of the good is a sufficient condition of action in accord with it, that once we attain knowledge, action takes care of itself (Plato, 1997: 37b, 87c and 509e). Yet millennia of experience refutes this optimism, and humanity today witnesses daily the environmental degradation wrought by anthropocentric practices of commodification, exploitation and consumption, and yet continues in these very same practices. Whenever opinion leaders and policymakers around the globe recognize the urgency of nature's plight, the common response is to promise newer and more sophisticated modes of technological intervention and exploitation to solve the problem (Crist, 2017). We expect to invent, extract, build, buy and consume our way out of the consequences of a dying

environment – possessed of knowledge, yet acting as if ignorant.

It is important to distinguish such enlightened inaction from the related but distinct phenomenon of hypocrisy. The latter is manifest when one professes that a norm or principle should be followed and yet does not follow it in one's own action – for instance, if I maintain that one ought never to lie and yet I proceed to lie when I find it convenient. No doubt the state of the ecosphere today may be traced, in some part, to such behaviour, and even when the worldly effects of ecological hypocrisy are comparatively mild, its ethical effects are significant. Over time we condition ourselves to live as exceptions to rules that we (profess to) recognize as valid, thereby indulging in a kind of freeriding.

But our ecological ills are not rooted merely or primarily in hypocrisy. Perhaps the more common source is inaction and non-commitment in the face of experiential, testimonial and scientific knowledge – and I suggest that this phenomenon is more entrenched and more dangerous than hypocrisy. The hypocrite might be persuaded to live up to her own principles; she at least recognizes an obligation, even if she does not fulfil it. Whereas the sort of inaction I have in mind is partly a problem of knowledge, and of the ethical consequences of what might appear to be dispassionate, neutral facts. Although social and political history furnishes countless examples of people knowing better than they act,³ ecological examples are especially present, urgent and troubling. Despite steadily accumulating evidence and a strengthening scientific consensus regarding the human causes of ecological devastation and its import, most individuals and societies do little to curtail these causes and much to contribute to them. For instance, few people today are unaware that the extraction and use of fossil fuels directly and indirectly damages the ecosphere in a host of potentially irrevocable ways, emitting pollutants (including greenhouse gases), destroying natural habitats and decimating biodiversity. Yet, possessed of this

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knowledge, the vast majority of humanity – especially, though not only, in the industrialized countries of the global north – systematically continues staggering consumption of fossil fuels, acting as if we did not know what we most certainly do know. Despite the lack of attention this phenomenon seems to receive, enlightened inaction is thus one essential aspect of our global environmental crisis.

Thoreau as exemplar

Few individuals grappled as self-consciously and extensively with the phenomenon I have just identified as did Henry David Thoreau. With regard to the

high crisis of his place and time – chattel slavery and the violence used to maintain and expand it – he lamented that there were “nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous [person]” (Thoreau, 1992: 230). All around him were those who knew, but did not act on that knowledge – not even hypocrites, for few of these patrons of virtue insisted that individuals *should* act beyond their nominal support for the cause of abolition. Thoreau was also acutely aware of the ecological effects of industrialization and the materialist culture in which it was embedded. Indeed, few topics exercised him so. He railed against the logic of the market, which



Artwork

by Anna Sebastian

About the artwork:

The four paintings that appear in this article have Walden Pond as their subject. Henry David Thoreau lived in a cabin on the shores of this pond for around two years as what could be considered an experiment in ecological citizenship. The paintings were created using gouache on paper.

Higher-resolution versions: <https://is.gd/ecoartwork>



converted nature into a reserve of resources to be exploited (e.g. stripping ice from New England ponds to chill the drinks of industrialists and slave masters), and which treated human beings (both enslaved and ‘free’) as mere machines meant to serve the unquestioned goods of production and consumption. Though his understanding was well ahead of that of his neighbours, the signs of ecological and ethical decline to which he pointed were anything but hidden. Describing the mass of society as caught in a waking slumber, he styled his philosophy as a practice of awakening oneself and others, of bringing one’s way of life in line with one’s knowledge and what it intimates. This ethic of self-cultivation partakes of a classical tradition according to which philosophy means “so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates,” closing the

gap between knowing and doing (Thoreau 1992: 9).

In his most famous work, Thoreau recounts roughly two years that he spent “liv[ing] low and far[ing] hard” in the woods near Walden Pond (Thoreau, 1992: 143–4). It was, as he describes it, an experiment in living – specifically, “to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach” (Thoreau, 1992: 61). Seeking these facts in nature, his experiment was one of ecological citizenship, of accommodating his way of life to the rhythms, offerings and demands of his environs. Though his activities and reflections were varied, Thoreau’s experiment exemplifies three practices that are needful given our current ecological crisis: *self-accounting*, *deliberate living* and *simplicity*.

Self-accounting

Thoreau devotes the first and longest chapter of *Walden to economy*, a theme that occupies him throughout many of his writings. Putting a critical twist on the common 19th-century understanding of the term, he describes “that economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy” and which requires careful self-accounting (Thoreau, 1992: 35).⁴ In very practical terms, he lays out the exact – and, by the standards of his day, remarkably limited – outlay required to support himself in his living experiment. Yet the point of his ongoing exercise of self-accounting was ethical, in the classical sense, as well as practical. Examining how he lived, and what he did to himself and to his human and non-human neighbours in order to get his living, was a constitutive study of his own character (*ethos*) from an importantly ecological standpoint.

The point of self-accounting is not simply to calculate one’s balance of production and consumption, though this is a necessary element of the practice. More deeply, it is to soberly trace the effects of our actions and the ways of life they collectively compose. Throughout his works, Thoreau asks himself, and presses us to ask ourselves: at what expense do I live? What do I endorse, affirm and deny in how I work and what I consume? What values am I enacting in my conscious choices and my unreflective habits? These questions, as Thoreau knew, do not answer themselves, and approaching them honestly is often discomfiting. At the time when many of his abolitionist contemporaries decried the evils of slavery and yet enjoyed cotton and sugar stained with the blood of the enslaved, acting as if they did not know what they knew, Thoreau exemplified a will to self-knowledge that he believed was preparatory to an ethical relationship not only with one’s fellow humans, but with all of nature. Choosing how to be and live better begins with daring to know what one already is and has chosen.

Deliberate living

In word and deed, Thoreau embodies the obverse of enlightened inaction. From his

time at Walden and his participation in the Underground Railroad to his lectures and essays, he advocated and strove to exemplify a life of principled, self-aware action. He wanted his deeds to rise to the level of what he knew and what, in light of his careful self-accounting, he valued. What he ate, what he wore, how he dwelt and how he sought enjoyment all reflected a desire to live in accord with himself as part of a larger world – not to be what he did not respect, and not to do what he knew to be unjust or harmful to both his human and non-human neighbours. As one persistent and dismissive strain of literary criticism demonstrates, it is easy to lose sight of the nobility of Thoreau’s vision by poring over the little ways in which he ostensibly fell short of his own principles (e.g. Lowell, 1954; Buranelli, 1957; Schulz, 2015). Exposing and lampooning the shortcomings of another is an easy way to absolve oneself of their ideals, and thus to justify oneself in being what one already was. Valuing, as he did, more than his own comfort, Thoreau espoused a more ennobling notion: “In the long run [individuals] hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high” (Thoreau, 1992: 18).

In ecological contexts this notion entails, at the very least, having the courage to honestly examine one’s own choices and way of life (*i.e.* to practise self-accounting) and to live according to what one knows about oneself and about the social and ecological settings in which one dwells. One need not suppose that knowing the good will cause one to perform it in order to maintain, as Thoreau did, that we already know how to live better than we actually do – how to live more in step with what matters to us both subjectively and objectively than we have thus far taken the trouble to achieve. Self-accounting is little more than an academic exercise if it is not combined with the resolve to live the consequences of one’s knowledge. Long before modern climate science or longitudinal studies of the ecological and human health effects of mass production and consumption, Thoreau saw how

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human beings were destroying the natural systems that sustained both human and non-human life. Today, in factual terms, we know far better than he did, and yet we aim far lower. The value of his example, as one of good ecological citizenship, is to remind us that we are no less robustly equipped to rise to the challenge of our own knowledge and ideals than he was. We know something (indeed, many things) higher at which to aim, and must only be willing to do so.

Simplicity

As one historian put it, Thoreau “told us what we needed to know in order to know what we do not need” (Diggins, 1972: 571). Thoreau was one of the earliest and most prescient critics of the (then nascent) modern mentality of endless economic growth driven by overproduction and overconsumption. The answer he supplied to rapacious materialism was not a one-size-fits-all model of minimal living, but instead an open-textured ethic of simplicity built upon practices of self-accounting. He witnessed his contemporaries becoming “tools of their tools,” subjecting themselves to lives of toil, and nature to relentless exploitation, so that they might have fashionable clothes, a respectable house, a pleasant vacation and the latest offerings of the market with which to distract themselves from the toil it took to acquire them (Thoreau, 1992: 25). What has changed for us today is that our wants have grown and the costs of our consumption have become an existential threat to the entire ecosphere.

Given that we know this, and given that there is no plausible denial of the toll human beings, individually and collectively, have inflicted upon the Earth for the sake of an escalating cycle of production and consumption that never quite satisfies us, we are ripe for the edification Thoreau offers. Whatever answer there is to the ecological crisis we have created, it lies precisely where the causes do: in us, in what we desire, in what we are willing to do to fulfil those desires and in what we are willing to tell ourselves

in order to feel tolerably good about those desires. Just as the first step to escaping a hole that one has dug for oneself is to stop digging it deeper, the first step to awakening from somnambular patterns of exploitation and consumption is to recognize our participation in them. This means accepting what we already know and *owning* that knowledge. The simplification to follow could take countless forms, many of which would be less stringent or austere than Thoreau’s, but all must disabuse us of the Orwellian doublethink that the only way to save the Earth is through more and better consumption. Shiny new shovels will not get us out of our hole.

Knowing and doing

There is an easily anticipated criticism to this line of thought, one originating from within the environmental movement itself. What I have suggested may seem to endorse an individualized, neoliberal ethic that counsels us to act as individual consumers *in place of* collective, public action (*cf.* Bookchin, 1989; Maniates, 2001). Do your part from the comfort and isolation of your own living room; save the world while you shop. There is indeed a danger of further depoliticizing issues of vital public concern. However, Thoreau’s example is not one of apolitical retreat, but one of engagement on *all* registers of life – not only through institutions, and not only in ways that we find easy and comfortable (Plotica, 2016). (See also Alexander and Burdon [2017: 50].) In fact, “think[ing] institutionally” has its own ethical dangers: it can tempt us to absolve ourselves of individual effort and responsibility, and appear to justify daily personal inaction by counselling that only systemic action really matters (Maniates, 2001: 33). Voting ‘the right way’, donating to ‘the right cause’ or joining ‘the right organization’ easily become substitutes for the difficult work of actually changing one’s way of life – a way of outsourcing responsibility to our institutions just as excessive individualization can outsource responsibility to corporations. Whether we like it or not, as individuals we ‘vote’ every day in countless ways, and

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responsible ecological citizenship requires doing so knowingly and deliberately, squaring our private lives with our broader responsibilities. Thoreau reminds us that our common ecological fate does not depend merely “on how you vote at the polls – the worst [person] is as strong as the best at that game; it does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot-box once a year, but on what kind of [person] you drop from your chamber into the street every morning” (Thoreau, 2001: 343). Ordinary, individual action is not the whole of the matter, to be sure, but it is undoubtedly an important part of it.

While knowledge is not a sufficient condition for right action, it puts us on notice of our causal responsibility for ecological harm, thereby binding us explicitly to corresponding ethical responsibilities. One need not invoke an elaborate philosophical justification for this claim (though

such accounts could be offered), for it is adequate to appeal to an ordinary sense in which we are accustomed to thinking about relationships between knowledge and responsibility. Knowledge of causal responsibility for damaging phenomena is ordinarily and unproblematically taken to ground at least some degree of ethical responsibility (or at least to remove excuses or mitigations). For instance, knowing that running a red light with my car might cause an accident meaningfully changes my relationship to any accident that ensues from my running the light. In particular, my knowledge of that causal implication makes any carelessness or inaction I might exhibit *more* ethically problematic and worthy of condemnation – and the fact that other people running red lights also causes other accidents does not detract from either my causal or ethical responsibilities for the harms wrought by my own actions.⁵

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Such pragmatics of responsibility apply to actions with ecological repercussions as well.

The ethical responsibility involved here can be thought of as (what is termed in moral philosophy) an *imperfect duty* – that is, an obligation whose exact requirements are not identical for all persons in all contexts, but are sensitive to the contingent situation and capacities of each agent and admit of varying degrees of fulfilment. Such duty rests unevenly upon humanity, insofar as some individuals contribute more to patterns of ecological destruction and some (often the very same) are more capable of changing how they live in consequential ways. (For an especially thoughtful discussion of how such duties might be understood and practically addressed, see Gray [2018: 125–6].) I am certainly not suggesting that every person is required to live a life of unrelenting, supererogatory self-sacrifice for a common ecological good. Rather, I claim only that we are not entitled to act as if we simply do not know, and thereby make exceptions of ourselves. We are each *meaningfully* (if not solely and entirely) responsible for the individual who enters the world each morning and what he or she contributes to a shared ecological condition. What is more, this obligation is valid on both egoistic and altruistic grounds (if not identically so). When we are all in the only boat, everyone has an ethical as well as an existential investment in keeping it afloat, whether for one’s own sake or for that of others.

As an example of the agent- and context-sensitivity of the ethical responsibility I have discussed, it is worth ending with a brief remark on the situation of academics as public intellectuals who, as noted above, bear special, more expansive ecological obligations. It is not our job – and I explicitly include myself – merely to come to amass and to disseminate knowledge, but also to *exemplify* what can and should be done in respect of what we know, or at least to exemplify the urgency of doing something in respect of the harms to which we know ourselves

to be contributing. Both the facts and the courses of action they intimate shall always be contested matters at some level, but this should not lead academics to resign themselves to the role of purportedly neutral messengers, above the messy fray of advocacy. This is neither to say that academics – or anyone else – must go to the lengths that Thoreau did to awaken his neighbours and furnish them with the example of a life well lived (though perhaps we should), nor is this to say that individual action should enervate or displace institutional action. Rather, we in the knowledge professions ought to do a better job of living up to the ecological responsibilities that come with the power that knowledge imparts. ■

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Notes

- 1 Children, and adults with certain disabilities, or in certain social and economic circumstances, might reasonably be exempted from some or all of such *ethical* responsibility even when they bear meaningful *causal* responsibility.
- 2 I would also add that corporate executives and industry researchers bear a similar heightened obligation, though I am far less optimistic that these persons could be relied upon to recognize and act upon it.
- 3 For instance, Thomas Jefferson explicitly recognized the evils of slavery and yet continued to hold and profit from slaves, and many individuals aware of the cruelty of the meat and dairy industries continue to consume their products.
- 4 Such practices of self-accounting have deep and diverse roots, and not only in the West, and range from religious and philosophical self-examination to contemporary psychology and self-help movements.
- 5 An overly narrow focus upon institutions falls prey to such a mistake, treating (however unwittingly) the harms caused by others as mitigations of one’s responsibility for the harms caused by one’s own actions.

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