

Politics is not enough: Individual action and the limits of institutions

This article explores the ways in which, with respect to ecological harms and values, individual action is a needful complement to institutional politics. Despite the increasing visibility of ecological devastation and increasingly widespread concern and calls for action, the common focus on public and private institutions often overshadows individual agency and responsibility. In comparison to the scale of ecological harms and the power of institutions like governments and corporations, the ability of individuals to act meaningfully as responsible ecological citizens often appears relatively trivial. The article advances three claims challenging this sense of cynicism and individual powerlessness: first, that individual action is itself an important ecological practice; second, that such action is needed to counteract the passive, irresponsible, consumerist mindset that often characterizes exclusive reliance upon institutional policies; and third, that individual experimentation with ecologically responsible action both encourages experimentation in others and often provides models of more sustainable ways of living.

“[T]he environmental crisis should make it dramatically clear, as perhaps it has not always been before, that there is no public crisis that is not also private.”

(Berry, 1969)

As the crises that increasingly characterize the ‘Anthropocene’ grow in scope and severity, it is understandable to suppose that serious and fruitful responses must be of like scale.¹ Since our present ecological crises are so immense and complex, only institutional approaches, and above all the actions of governments and international organizations, appear capable of making any meaningful difference. Stated conversely, although individuals contribute daily to patterns of ecological harm, their ability to make any deliberate, positive impact often seems vanishingly small. The only real solution, rather, appears to be matching scale to scale, demanding better policies from existing or improved institutions (e.g. Maniates, 2001). Hence, with respect to escalating ecological devastation and its ineluctably global consequences, the demands for and hopes

invested in collective, political action tend to overshadow attention to and pursuits of individual, ethical action.

If only because of the scope and gravity of ecological devastation, the expectations placed upon public institutions are understandable. Despite the competition they face from some of the largest economic corporations, nation-states remain the most powerful institutional actors, and as such have the most powerful tools for directly affecting practices of production and consumption that contribute so heavily to ecological destruction (e.g. via legal prohibitions or aggressive taxation and spending schemes). The thought that the ecological crisis can *only* have a political, institutional solution has, therefore, a certain plausibility. So too does the sense of the apparent futility of individual action (apart from perhaps the satisfaction of washing one’s hands of the sins of others). The anthropogenic component of the ecological crisis we face has been centuries in the making and is the accumulated result of the repeated actions of billions of individuals. In comparison to that fact, what any one of us eats for breakfast tomorrow, or which mode of transportation

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we might use for our next holiday, pales in significance. Even if we know that what we do each day adds a few more grains of sand to the dune, the suggestion that we might also individually start dismantling that dune one grain at a time seems to strain both a sense of practical realism and a sense of fair responsibility.

Yet one may nonetheless make the strong case that politics is not enough, and indeed that collective action of any description should not be taken as the only, or in every circumstance the best, approach to ecological problems. My aim here is to show that we face neither a zero-sum trade-off nor a choice between mutually exclusive or even mutually antagonistic options. Rather, collective, institutional action and individual action supplement and reinforce one another. For good or for ill, politics and ethics are not isolated spheres of life, only one of which is meaningfully related to ecological issues, but two aspects of the fundamental, encompassing question of how we each shall live in a common ecosphere. My approach is to advance three claims about how the gap between politics and individual action might be bridged, and about why it should be. By way of each, I hope to illustrate why, despite all that inspires cynicism and resignation to powerlessness and hopelessness, political action must be complemented, or still better *guided*, by individual action in ordinary daily life.

Individual ecological practices

An imposing feature of human life since before the Industrial Revolution has been the fragmentation of individual agency in a fashion that resembles the division of labour in economic production characteristic of market systems (Polanyi, 2001; Herzog, 2013). Political, social and economic critics from Henry David Thoreau and John Stuart Mill to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx recognized and despaired of this development and the toll it takes upon human beings and the natural world. As Immanuel Kant sketched this troubling habit of mind and conduct: “If I have a book that understands for me, a spiritual advisor who has a conscience for me, a

doctor who decides upon a regimen for me, and so forth, I need not trouble myself at all” (Kant, 1996: 17). We have become accustomed, as it were, to think that the more important or complex the task, the better it is that we find someone else to do it for us.² Our instrumentalization of and alienation from non-human nature has been both practically and intellectually intertwined with the fragmentation of the individual into roles, some of which one performs for money, some that one pays others to perform, and still others that one performs by and for oneself out of choice or necessity (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2016). With such division of roles comes a division of responsibility – if I pay someone else or elect someone else to perform such a role for me, then doing it well or poorly becomes something for *them* to worry about. I have paid my fee or cast my vote not just so that they do the work for me, but also so that I need not constantly trouble myself about it.

This is not to suggest that humans have ever been individually self-sufficient or perfectly attuned to the world beyond their own consciousness, but rather to note that the division and sub-division of the self as a deliberate agent has been part and parcel of the disenchantment of the world in which that self is isolated, alienated and powerless (Bennett 2001; cf. Heidegger, 1993). Our retreat into narrowly defined tasks and functions has simultaneously meant pulling back from engagement with portions of the world that affect us, and that we affect, but which are now largely someone else’s business. Classical and neoliberal capitalism have certainly been, and continue to be, fundamental to the proliferation of such disenchantment, but no single intellectual or institutional culprit bears the entire responsibility. I also do not mean to suggest that this specialization and contraction of our individual horizons has only and always been a bad thing. Such practices have undoubtedly been economically efficient, and have had many salutary effects upon the creation and maintenance of communities of meaning, and for some of us even our appreciation of the non-human

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world, but they have also encouraged the notion that we, as individuals, are neither fit to make a difference nor fit to act upon our own values. Each should quietly tend their little switch along the grand assembly line and hope that the work of others will keep the whole enterprise running sustainably. Stated negatively, we are accustomed to outsourcing a great deal of individual thought and action, not just to political institutions, but also to the market. Thus, the motto of our age, in Kant's phrase, might be "I need not think, if only I can pay" – whether with my money or with my vote – and then "others will readily undertake the irksome business for me" (Kant, 1996: 17).

But we might also state the point positively, as a principle of action rather than as an explanation of failure. One is unlikely to appreciate, or perhaps even recognize, the consequences of decisions that one outsources to others. My intention here is not to prescribe any particular mode of ecologically minded action (for reasons I illustrate below). It is enough here to underscore the fact that our most visible modes of ecological action – institutional and mass politics – often distract us and even discourage us from what we can reasonably do. We are apt to lie on our backs "talking about the fall of man," as Thoreau put it, "and never make an effort to get up" (Thoreau, 2001: 352). We are each the hand that wields the axe that fells the forest, but which could just as well nurture and protect it.

Beyond consumerism

Our practices of, and attitudes towards, consumption – both individual and collective – march in lockstep with ecological decline (e.g. Crist, 2019). Although consumption is oft recognized as a "mirror of the human condition," it is typically thought of as an essentially socio-economic phenomenon, a matter of what we buy and why we do it (Trentman, 2012: 1; cf. Baudrillard, 1998: 69–98). Modern consumption and consumerism are political phenomena as well, though. Bracketing the related issue of widespread ignorance regarding

the ecological effects of human activities, common attitudes and expectations even among the relatively well-informed can be unsettling. Scientists and activists spread awareness of ecological harm and people look to government and international organizations to devise and enact policy solutions. Apart from voting, signing petitions, and occasional protests and marches, most people await to be told what the possible policy responses are, that they may choose between them at the next election (and typically only indirectly, by voting for parties or representatives). Whatever the finer procedural details, the message is clear enough: political institutions will take care of things, and apart from episodic political engagement "[i]t doesn't require any changes at all for individuals" (Birnbaum, 2019). Couple this with the environmental promises of so-called 'woke capitalism', and ecological citizenship might appear as a spectator activity in which the best that one can do is vote for the greenest party and patronize the businesses with the greenest products.

Much as the fragmentation of the modern self often makes individual action look merely eccentric, like one hobby among others, the fixation upon institutions (both public and private) likewise devalues individual action in at least two ways. First, it engenders a model of action based upon passive consumption. Whether in politics or in the market, someone else develops the alternatives, and we simply choose which we shall nominally support. Here I do not mean an attitude of due consideration towards expert research (as such passivity is also common amongst those who flatly deny the best scientific evidence), but a tendency to assume that nothing one does individually matters, and that the responsible (or at least acceptable) course is to wait for public officials and private entrepreneurs to offer menus of possible policies, goods and services from which we might choose, or perhaps to simply make the hard choices for us. Again, perhaps the most alluring ideal is that of a better way forward that does not require individuals to do much of anything – governments

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and corporations will find ways to make the same goods and services (more) ecologically sustainable, and if they do it well we will not even notice.

Second, the fixation upon institutions as the primary if not exclusive locus of ecological action encourages irresponsibility. If the fate of the ecosphere is consigned to the decisions made by public and private institutions, then the instrumentally rational individual has little to do but vote, buy and be merry to the fullest extent available. Picture here the principled supporter of a carbon tax (or whatever policy you like) who nonetheless continues to live in enjoyment of all the amenities that their economic resources and social opportunities afford them, ostensibly occupying the political high ground while doing little if anything in their own lives. The reasons for such conduct are no doubt many, but one among them is surely the systematic privileging of institutional action over individual action. As every tragedy-of-the-commons scenario illustrates, we easily become accustomed to patterns of conduct which, little by little, bring about states of affairs that none of us would have chosen if it were to happen all at once. Any ecological discourse encouraging the deference to institutions that justifies such irresponsibility needs serious reconsideration.

Even if there is some truth behind the official discourses and private sensibilities that discourage individual action, passivity and irresponsibility are damaging and dangerous. Both phenomena habituate individuals to carrying on with destructive patterns of consumption and conduct, perhaps with a sense of dejection or even despair, but nonetheless with a clear conscience. All the while, consumerism is such an essential aspect of modern social life and individual identity that we could scarcely expect it *not* to manifest in our politics. Even as public confidence in political institutions wanes, most people still seem to wait for a political solution to be offered to them and implemented for them. While we wait, we do what has become second nature to us: we continue of our own

accord down the path from which we hope someone else will divert us. What is more, habits of passivity and irresponsibility encourage and justify us in making exceptions of ourselves. Such personal exceptionalism is, of course, widespread in many spheres of life, with or without the habits I am describing. However, the state of popular ecological awareness propagates the sense that individual agency is all but ineffective until it is combined under the heading of a movement or institution. Hence there is not much point in sacrificing too much of one’s own comfort, a sense that is intensified by the attraction of positional, status goods, the relative deprivation of which the inhabitants of the global North are particularly acculturated to find discomfiting. Lastly, for my purposes, passivity and irresponsibility together risk forming a negative feedback pattern: disconnection and passivity feed the sense of hopelessness and cynicism which then also leads to greater political detachment and a retreat into a private life of consumption (*e.g.* Taylor and Murray, 2020).

As with my previous claim, my intention here is not to prescribe any particular individual or collective action, only to insist that both are profoundly valuable, precisely because they are not merely interchangeable. How we act publicly is inevitably connected to how we act privately, at least insofar as we are unlikely passionately and consistently to demand and support institutional actions that we do not deem worth even the attempted pursuit in our own daily lives. As Thoreau, again, would have it, the fate of the world “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). Or, in the words of Wendell Berry, “the environmental crisis has its roots in our lives. By the same token, environmental health will also be rooted in our lives” and thus it is misguided to expect “that we could correct what is wrong merely by tinkering with the institutional machinery” (Berry, 1969). This is not to

devalue politics, but to refuse to expect it to be a kind of alchemy whereby private passivity and disengagement is converted into committed, robust public action.

Experiments and examples

No doubt some of the cynicism and powerlessness people feel comes from the fact that it is hard to imagine other ways of living. From a human perspective, reality is “largely a matter of habit,” which is less a metaphysical claim than an epistemological and ethical one (Goodman, 1978: 20). What seems possible is often a matter of what we have seen, and what we can thus imagine as a realistic fit within our own lives as we habitually experience and understand them. As Kant as well as Thoreau, Mill and Emerson suggested, while it is difficult to break from the common patterns of life and to swim against the current of one’s social surroundings, those who manage to do so furnish examples that might inspire. This is not to say that our hopes rest upon a few great individuals providing a pattern for the rest of us to follow – this is just the problem of passive consumption restated. Rather, individual experiments in living furnish both evidence of a particular way of living and, more importantly, evidence that still other ways are possible. The tendencies I sketched above too often suppress the sense that individual experimentation with ways of life could be anything more than the eccentric pursuits of the relatively privileged. It is appealing, if not always happily so, to believe that the problem is too big, individual action too insignificant, and addressing the problem is properly someone else’s job besides. Conformity, then, is not just a social or ethical problem; in our present world, it is an ecological problem as well.

Experimental living is not just misunderstood, it holds real promise. First of all, living according to ecologically responsible principles makes an impact, however small. The course by which human beings have devastated the planet was made up of tiny steps, each of which seems insignificant in isolation, and yet here we are. Anyone who thinks that ordinary actions are inherently

incapable of making a difference is missing the trees for the forest.

Second, individual action, deliberately experimental or not, reinforces a sense of investment in both the causes of the problem and possible ways of addressing it. Without too much idealism or optimism, this could create a positive feedback. Taking ecological responsibility upon oneself and acting accordingly brings one into contact with (at least some of) the tangible results of individual action, which proves the value of such action and intimates its further potential. Responsibility begets action which begets responsibility, and so on, while passivity and irresponsibility begets powerlessness and inaction which begets passivity and irresponsibility. Such investment in a shared ecological condition may, and hopefully will, find political expressions as well. We generally do carry our convictions into the voting booth. But as politics is indeed not alchemy, it is unlikely that we shall end up with enlightened, dedicated ecological citizens in government if we ourselves do not cultivate such citizenship in our own daily lives. Institutions, after all, are just composed of persons like us who happen to occupy offices of authority.

Finally, as even a casual perusal of the internet will show, information technologies give experimental living a degree of exposure that was previously unimaginable. In nineteenth-century America, hundreds of thousands of people lived much like Thoreau did at Walden Pond (if not for the same reasons) and for far longer – but we remember him because he wrote a book about it. Social media and more traditional websites, for all their ills, are authorship platforms that enable the dissemination of countless experiments, encouraging imitation and new forms of experiment. I believe that Emerson was essentially correct that much of what we take as the impersonal effusions of humanity writ large “may be traced back to their origin in a private brain,” to someone who experimented, even if the ultimate effects of any given idea or practice only result because of adoption and repetition at far

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greater scales (Emerson, 1983: 1082). I am not suggesting that what any one person attempts will necessarily make a profound and widespread impact, either directly or indirectly.³ This is not simplistic, DIY optimism, but part and parcel of intelligent, responsible agency. Making apple cider vinegar at home will not save the ecosphere, but the tacit belief that the only possible modes of ecological citizenship come pre-packaged in political platforms and retail product lines will surely destroy it.

Institutions and individuals

As social scientists are wont to remind us, we live through institutions, both large and small. Yet we are not therefore mere dependent parts of these structures, unable to take either individual initiative or responsibility. Institutions are scenes and tools of action, which both constrain and enable human agency, but we, as individuals, are always the agents (Plotica, 2013). As John Dewey, one of the greatest advocates of deliberate political action, observed, “[t]he 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). Once more, then: we *need* institutions, and *especially* political institutions. However, the expectation that these are the *only* effective agents is not only mistaken but dangerously self-defeating.

If we are to treat the cause as well as the symptoms of ecological devastation, melioration must begin where the harm begins – with us, at home, at work, in our neighbourhoods and communities, in the silence of law and below the threshold of the state. Individual action, to be clear, need not be action *in isolation* from others, action without cooperation or common purpose. Indeed, what I have been advocating is, if anything, an argument *for* the importance of civil society – what stands between the individual and the largest public and private institutions – rather than a mitigation of it. We cannot afford to leave any tool off the table, or any promising mode of action untried. It would be utopian to expect that

millions, if not billions, of individuals will spontaneously care about the ecosphere for non-instrumental reasons and act accordingly. It is not utopian, however, to expect people to be more likely to act with ecological responsibility when they believe their personal actions, in and around their daily lives, truly make a difference. ■

Notes

- 1 The author would like to thank Stefanie Mäder for her insight and encouragement, as well as Joe Gray and the anonymous reviewers of this essay for their constructive yet challenging criticisms.
- 2 While the ‘we’ and ‘us’ of this essay most clearly address residents of the global North, to the extent that the economic and cultural practices of neoliberal capitalism proliferate, the scope of these terms continues to grow.
- 3 Some individuals have certainly achieved great influence through their actions and advocacy. However, the most visible and vocal individuals outside of major institutions, such as Greta Thunberg or Al Gore, have generally raised the banner of institutional action.

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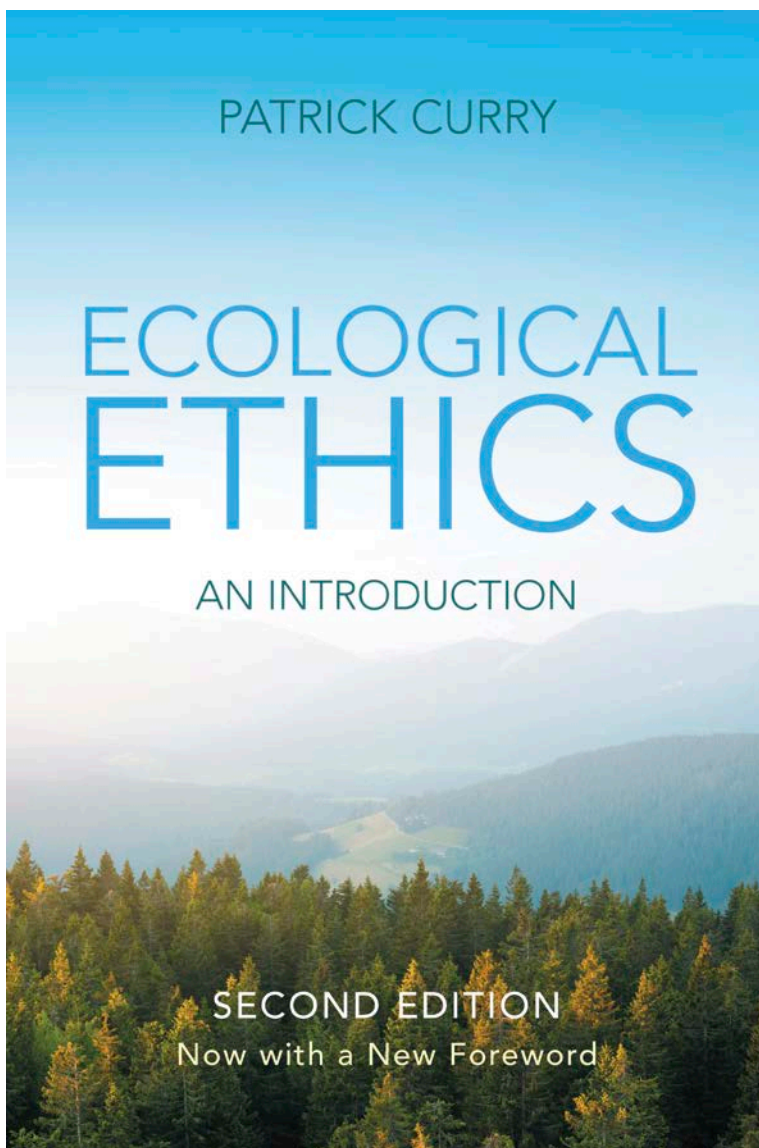
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