

5F: NATURE, SOCIETY AND A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE?

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The nature – society nexus

The human being dominates the biosphere and so it is important to consider the nature of being human. The distinction between our physical role and the essential intelligent nature of the species is important in the search for understanding. While complex, our physical impact is everywhere to be seen and the problem looms that we seem likely to so degrade our earthly environment that our species may die out, or not be able to maintain our prided civilisation. The problem is the social, economic and political aspects of human beings are so complex, and potentially confounding, that a successful outcome is problematic.

A dilemma

The response of society to environmental challenges is difficult to understand. We often fail to take actions that might deal with problems and seem rarely to act with precautionary care. Our ability to sustain water and food supplies are discussed in terms not of *if* but *when*. There is also grave concern about human induced climate change. Doubt is cast on the survival of many; not the sustainability of society and nature.

Why this should be so is a conundrum. Human beings are intelligent, or at least so we say. Sternberg identifies intelligence as a combination of three abilities: analytical, creative and practical: being able to put intelligent thought into action (Sternberg, 1995). He tells the story of two students deemed to be of equivalent intelligence being confronted by a bear on a path (Sternberg, 1995, 372). Each acts, but differently. He asks which is the more intelligent, based on their response to the situation.

If human beings are intelligent and intelligence implies application to life situations, what is wrong? Why are we not making 'sensible' decisions? Why do we seem to ignore fundamental problems?

To answer these questions the search for knowledge should focus on the nature of human beings. The problem is not the physical environment but the nature of the human being and our consequent society. In the nature-society nexus the nature of society is the central issue.

Answers?

Before considering the nature of society and of the human beings that comprise it, a brief consideration of responses to problems is important. The intent is to raise the complexity of life on Earth and the state of present knowledge. Rather than tackling the question of whether we have answers, it is salutary to consider the extent to which answers have been effective.

For example, in central Queensland the beef grazing industry faced the need to improve the quality of the beef being marketed. The production process was lengthy, with cattle grazing on rough native pastures. Improvements in the pastures were considered necessary. Also, the British breeds were not well suited to the tropical conditions; Indian cattle were better. So the industry (society) took the decision to improve pastures and turn to *Bos indicus* as the livestock. In many regions the fertile soils under Brigalow (*Acacia*

harpphylla) were cleared using modern machinery to develop the best potential country (Nix, 1994).

But problems arose. In the first instance the new breed of cattle were indeed more resistant to drought but this meant that they, not the vegetation, were the last things standing in a drought. The land was exposed to erosion, particularly by the heavy rainfalls characteristic of tropical climates. The improved pastures passed through the digestive system of the cattle much more quickly, placing greater demands on the development of biomass in pastures. In drier times the fertile but finer particles were blown away, since Brigalow soils were subject to wind as well as to water erosion.

These 'lessons' can be seen in so many examples of land 'development' in Australia. The story of wheat growing and the century it took to reestablish the original productivity of the soils is a better known one (Donald, 1982, Williams, 1974, Figure 74).

The crucial lesson lies in the need for trial and error and to seek to progress from one learning experience to another. The knowledge that establishes a first, or even nth, attempt to solve perceived problems is partial and problematic. Any policy to 'fix' things is very unlikely to lead to a complete solution. The most likely outcome is more problems stemming from the policy and management decisions, and perhaps some success.

In the often maligned discipline of economics a problem arising from the application of knowledge is understood in a temporal sense as the problem of counter-cyclical policy. This happens if the action is taken at the wrong time, even though it might be well designed. The situation occurs like this. We become aware that the economy is turning down. This situation is studied and policy action is debated. Eventually a policy is implemented. However by this time the downturn is ending and the economy picking up. The policy is mistimed and counter to the conditions of that time.

Policy can also be misapplied in a spatial and/or sectoral sense. The downturn might be located in particular sectors of the economy which are spatially concentrated in some regions. The broad application of national policy might suit the regions with problems but be counter to the state of activity in other regions.

The problem of partiality of both understanding and decision making is apparent. There is a fascinating, even daunting, complexity. Uncertainty is always present, either in understanding what is happening, what policy decisions to take or what the impact of policy might be.

The decisions are for human beings to make as individuals, and in their collective existence as communities of a society.

Society – a gaggle of human beings

Society is the whole of a group of human beings, and in both the individual and the whole we see the same fundamental characteristics. The problem is that the character of the individual is magnified many times in the society of a community. The whole is more than the sum of the parts, but fundamental characteristics are recognisable.

So what is a human being?

The human being

Each human being is complex in her or his own right. Our biology is exceedingly complex, and then there is our consciousness and its expression in behaviour. What consciousness, a property of the mind, is and means in the society-nature nexus is crucial. But understanding the nature of mind and intelligence is problematic, because we seek to understand not some other thing or phenomenon but ourselves. To understand, our consciousness and intelligence are used reflexively and reflectively; what we understand is seen through our own senses and thought. There is no other understanding. Hence any knowledge we have of our complex identity with the properties of sentience and intelligence must be limited.

Behaviour is an outcome of sentience and intelligence. One contrast is between free will and individualism, and rationality. In political speak individualism is often seen as an inalienable right. Another contrast is between choice and constraint. Where free will, individualism and choice are paramount we might expect great diversity in behaviour; where constraint and rational behaviour are paramount fewer distinct patterns of behaviour are likely.

Economics, to manage its analysis of society, resorts to the concept of rational behaviour in decisions involving choice. Action is limited to the outcome of well informed and balanced decision making. In this model of life there is no room for impetuous behaviour, nor is there room for the complexity of a system where knowledge is limited or clouded. Nor is there room for behaviour shaping activity such as advertising.

The philosophical division between those who see life as a strongly systematised and constrained existence and those who see range and diversity is wide. Christopher Alexander identified the nature of life to be diverse in experience and behaviour. He developed the implications for urban planning in his classic article: *The city is not a tree* (Alexander, 1966). He first recounts a simple incident in his life to illustrate the nature of human life; his intent to do something, a chance interruption and a different path for the rest of the day. Without these chance events life would be much more regulated, and dull. In fact we seek to avoid this type of life; we live, even revel, in life's complexities.

These observations show us the seeds of problems.

Holding consciousness and its property of intelligence is the mind. This is both the source of the fascination and the problem of being human. One of the significant characterisations of mind is its property of being a sociology (Minsky, 1987). In a sense this implies a circularity between individual and collective. In the whole we see the one.

This conceptualisation sees the mind functioning as a plural system; it does not function as a centrally driven system. Rather it is a complex system of argument seeking to make sense of its sentience. It comes to conclusions, but, while the attention of the mind is directed to a particular issue, these conclusions are constantly being updated as more potential information is sensed and thought about. David Dennett's concept of *multiple drafts* is another interpretation of the nature of human beings. It runs counter to the more rigid rationalist conceptualisation of mind and behaviour as a deterministic system.

In our environment, both human and physical, this understanding makes sense. We evolved in an environment where we had to create understandings. There was, and still is, no prepared source interpreted by some other life form to learn from. The interpretation is our own and it is flawed. We find this each time someone creates a better interpretation of some part of our earthly environment.

Our development also supports this understanding. Formal education delivers much knowledge and understanding of what we sense. But it is amazing to watch the development of a child and see how much is learnt before formal schooling. First movement is self learnt; few parents teach a child to crawl. Language is learnt by interaction, not by formal teaching. And we know that children can learn several languages if immersed in them, for example where the parents have different languages and both are spoken.

Society

If the nature of the human mind is a sociology then the sociology of community must be much more complex and diverse. Power and authority structures within it contain leaders and followers. Groupings of people create the potential for power, where some can capture more power and authority in the community than others.

At one time urban sociologists went looking for the 'gatekeepers', the people who set the rules by which people lived (Pahl, 1975). In this simple view gatekeepers were thought to be relatively independent of society in their leadership positions. But of course they only existed in these positions as long as society would have them. Their political masters could change the rules the gatekeepers administered. And in turn the politicians could be changed by society, for they were elected to be representatives of society.

So this is the essential nature of society. Its lack of a simple deterministic form is its fascination but also its problem. It does not have a structure which is consistent but rather is constantly in flux. The command and control of monarchies evolved into democracies. In the command and control system of a king or dictator there is just one ultimate authority; in a democratic society there is breadth.

Modern society has a great potential for conflict between two forms of organisation: the public: for and by society; and the private: for particular interests. The public good of the first form currently is waning in influence, with privatisation becoming more dominant. It is a time of expanding global systems which threaten national and local public institutions. The focused but limited interests of private enterprise are stronger; their responsibility to society, both local and global, is limited.

In contrast, the complex decision making in plural society limits the effectiveness of the public sector. But, as John Ralston Saul argues, each needs the other. The public is essential. The private can only do so much and its effectiveness is limited by its fixed scope of interest and its limited time horizons. In private enterprise it is possible to be more heroic and get things done. In the public there is greater clamour and confusion. Leadership in the two realms is very different.

Also the affluence, attained through economic growth in the first world, has led to a strengthening of individualism and a loss of community. One of the observers of community, and strongest critics of the loss or commitment to community, is Putnam. His

recent study, *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000) and earlier article *The prosperous community* (Putnam, 1993) indicate the serious condition of society.

The idea that a society has a store of capital in its cohesiveness and commitment to its whole is a fundamental realisation of the nature of society. Social capital can be developed, used, or lost. At present it seems we have little of it. Without strong social capital, attempts to deal with future challenges seem doomed to failure; even with strong social capital effective action is problematic.

It therefore is strange to see public appeals to mutuality and voluntarism coming from leaders who, at the same time, push individualism and self realisation. After the disruption of society by the agrarian and industrial revolutions communities developed a strong social capital through an ethos of mutual responsibility. Social capital, strong in the tight-knit rural communities, was redeveloped in movements like the co-operatives and mutual interest societies: the emergence of community co-operation initiated by Robert Owen was expressed in a great variety of community activity: mutual insurance, mutual health care, mutual motorists' associations and so on. The last decade has seen the demise of the last of these institutions as they have been privatised in the rush to create supposedly efficient private corporate bodies.

If we seek solutions to land degradation in rural areas through quasi-voluntary institutions like LandCare, the chances of success seem slim. Despite the stronger social capital of rural living, reflections on the effectiveness of LandCare are not promising, as Toyne and Farley said in their address to the National Press Club in 2000, ten years after LandCare was established.

Our society is not in a condition to meet challenges. Our social capital is weak and limited. Furthermore our leadership seems to be dependent upon a misunderstanding of the nature of society. Reaping the whirlwind of individualism in society seems more likely than taming it.

Conclusion

Society is the source of problems in the nature and society nexus. A better understanding of the complex behavioural nature of society is fundamental to understanding the tenuous relationship. Furthermore, our society is in a poor state to meet the contemporary challenge of highly altered and degraded environments. The individualism we observe in society and the ideology promoting the private over the public community interest is further degrading the mutuality essential to effective community response. But if the prophets, like Ralston Saul and Putnam, are heeded there might be a more positive future. The problem is the lack of time to establish some balance between society and nature to form a sustainable human future.

Discussion notes

- Some of us dislike the trend to individualism, though are forced into it to survive economically. We work longer hours and are too busy to go to LandCare, political, church or school P&C meetings. Purely social gatherings are minimised to a point where we haven't met half the new neighbours
- Perhaps the (surprising) salvation may come from technology: in interactive media like talkback radio, for instance. It can be awful, but it can also be excellent. It does give

the community an opportunity to listen to others' opinions, provide their own and have the debate move on a few steps. It requires, however, announcers who will allow people to voice an opinion different from their own and will remember what has been said earlier. Sandy McCutcheon's handling of a discussion on mental health in an August 2001 ABC Australia Talks Back program was an excellent example of how this issue can be handled informatively and sensitively. Email is another example of how instant communication can help to build a sense of community, and perhaps reach consensus in the light of shared information. So perhaps we should not despair too much at the demise of the town meeting. Democracy, if allowed, will just take on a new form

- In addition to building up social capital through radio and email, there is an interesting link within the organic community. Their background as a movement that rose in critique of the status quo (in agriculture) may well have resulted in the close networks seen by Tim Marshall in his paper (6C). It would be interesting to learn whether these organic networks operate for or against (1) the organic industry, in terms of growth opportunities (social capital can be negative too – if groups are too 'inward looking' or insular) and (2) rural communities, in terms of bridging historical conflicts, and sharing information with conventional farmers.
- A recent (and optimistic) example of building up both social and economic capital in the rural communities of Victoria was described in the ABC television Landline program on 24 November 2001. A number of abattoirs supporting the local beef industry had gone to the wall and one of the few remaining abattoirs had applied unsuccessfully to banks for loans to upgrade their operations. On the initiative of a local beef industry manager, superannuation funds agreed to provide a loan on the basis of a well thought out business plan, and this loan was supplemented by several members of the local community. The enterprise has been successful in providing quality meat products for local and export sales, bringing financial returns to bond holders which compared favourably with other capital investments. In terms of social capital it had the effect of preserving jobs, ploughing back profits into the local community and creating a real sense of ownership of the investment. The superannuation spokesperson in the program believed that this type of community initiative had great potential for reviving declining rural communities and keeping profits within Australia rather than with anonymous international conglomerates. There appears to be great scope for using community-generated superannuation capital for this type of investment, in co-operation with local businesses and community members. But it was made clear that decisions to release economic resources would depend primarily on the submission of well constructed and viable business plans rather than on worthy but unsubstantiated aims to 'revive rural communities'. Initiatives to establish community banks may also prove to be viable substitutes for the withdrawal of the big banking companies from rural towns
- Some years ago a book by the English economist Kenneth Boulding referred to two approaches to economic practice. The prevailing one he termed the linear 'cowboy economy', galloping across the landscape extracting resources and creating wastes ('externalities') as though these had no consequences. The alternative he termed the circular 'spaceship economy', which operates on the basis that resources are limited and pollution is lethal. Progress towards sustainability may require the recognition that we are indeed occupying a spaceship whose future survival depends on its human inhabitants preserving its biological and social capital.

Further reading

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