

A Green Job Guarantee & the Limits of Ecological Theory

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Abstract

This paper reorganizes ecological theory around monetary issuance in order to make visible inclusive paths to ecological egalitarianism. It locates a limiting decentralized localism in Post-Earth Day ecological theory, typified in Arne Næss' 'deep ecology' movement. In doing so, the paper argues that these limits contribute to our deficient global response to the current and incoming effects of climate change. Given the potential revolutionary resurgence of public interest in the central tenant of the Green New Deal, a federal job guarantee, this essay insists on an ecology of centralization that can actualize such a response. By extending the work of Martin Heidegger, it identifies an egalitarian ecology in the abundant and abstract ecological relationality of money as a medium of governance.

Keywords: Ecological Theory, Green New Deal, Decentralization, Climate Change, Job Guarantee

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Introduction

Writing for *In These Times*, Kate Aronoff claims that a reconceptualization of labor relations under a federal job guarantee “could give workers another option and help redefine what valuable, productive work looks like. It could also revitalize the public sphere in the process, providing funds and people power to help build a country where people are not only better paid but happier” (Aronoff 2018). Such a redefinition of political economic conditions would be profound enough on its own terms, but the Aronoff does not stop there. Instead, she goes on to make the claim for a green job guarantee, what would later become a central tenant of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Green New Deal proposal. She writes: “The question isn’t whether jobs are a means to an end or the end in itself, but how to put millions of people to work in a way that isn’t destroying the planet, as the outputs of capitalist production so often do.” She adds: “By no means does a job guarantee resolve the myriad supply and demand-side policy challenges posed by climate change, but it could go a long way toward rethinking what it is that an economy is supposed to produce” (Aronoff 2018). In other words, the federal job guarantee opens up numerous new possibilities for addressing the most pressing ecological issue currently facing humanity: climate change.

Given these renewed possibilities, it is urgent to return to the ecological theory that has served as the foundation of the Post-Earth Day environmental movement. However, the 1970s philosophical foundation is ill-equipped to inform the present ecological discourse due to its preoccupation with a limiting decentralized localism. A renewal of this theory is needed in order to meet the measure of this newly informed moment. It is the aim of this paper to offer an alternative ecological ontology that is not just open to centralization, but also insists upon its possibilities; one that insists that our future will be determined on its terms.

Norwegian ecological philosopher Arne Næss, whose writings profoundly influenced nearly all of post-1970s environmental politics, coined the term “deep ecology” in 1973. In his work, he offered an alternative to a “shallow ecology” that he found to be far too anthropocentric and privileging of the global north. His conception of a deep ecology rejected the “man-in-environment” image of ecological sustainability in favor of “the relational, total-field image.” In his new ecology, Næss posited that all organisms were to be conceived of as “knots in the biospherical net” of “intrinsic relations” (Næss 1973, 95). He thought of the entire organic system—in principle—as an egalitarian ecology that privileged no single organism at the expense of any other. It is clear that

Næss' intervention on behalf of an intrinsically relational view of ecology was an important step in the direction of an ecology of egalitarianism. Still, there are problems in his conception of social mediation as it relates to his egalitarian notions. For example, Næss saw the deep ecology movement as a movement that should prioritize "local autonomy and decentralization" over any mediated global relationality (Næss 1973, 98). This does not mean that he completely disregarded the necessity of the global perspective, but that he saw the local as the route to the global. It is along these lines, that the Deep Ecology movement's view misidentified the path to egalitarianism. Its privileging of locality and decentralization undermined a more capacious ecology, which limited the capability of collective demands for political action. To demonstrate these limits, this paper will interrogate the ontology of Næss' metaphorical apparatus—that of the biospherical net—and unearth shallowness embedded in the deep ecology movement's construction of being. The paper will examine the philosophers that Næss identifies as the most influential on the movement: Baruch Spinoza, Alfred North Whitehead and Martin Heidegger (Næss 2008, 106). It will be from the limits of their metaphysical assertions that this paper will specifically identify where some potential persists, as well as where Næss' net of knots is led astray. In offering an alternative topology of inherent ecological egalitarianism, and abstract centralization, I will attempt to recuperate metaphysical assertions offered by Heidegger specifically to fulfill impulses found in Næss that are left unattended to by his shallow topology.

Limited Localism of Deep Ecology

Arne Næss' "biospherical net" metaphorically conceives of organisms as related in a net of material knots. It conceives of an abstract idea, intrinsic ecological relationality, on *things* terms. This thing-ness is reduced to a relationality that is spatially *there*, or in a place. One can find emblems of this metaphorical reduction in much of modern philosophy, but when looking specifically toward the three philosophers that Næss identifies as being influential on the Deep Ecology movement, some specifics stand out. For example, Baruch Spinoza wrote of how he saw the causal realm of bodies in relationship to God's realm of ideas. He argued that these two realms are mirrors of one another, and in his 7th Proposition, he wrote that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (Nadler 2018). For Spinoza, *being abstractly* is ordered in exactly the same manner as *being materially*. This equation presents problems when one tries to conceive of ecological being through collective and abstract processes of intervention, for the preoccupation with an ontology of the thing that is local to a place, that is *there*, limits our ability to conceptualize the *everywhere* that mediates every *there*, but that cannot be reduced to any single location or *there* within its purview. This matters because if ecological being is to be imagined as spread through space in a decentralized net of knots, then it is profoundly difficult to conceive of ecology as fundamentally mediated by centralized governance, as this paper—and the job guarantee by design—claims that it *always* is. Without this insight, it is very difficult to *claim* egalitarianism as an obligation of centralized mediation, for any demands for

action must lead to a reduction of the obligation to dispersed and contingent local contestations, contestations that are ill-suited to attend to the global scale of our ecology.

In echoing Spinoza's notion that ideas are only implicated in the being of things as they can be broken down into their terms, Alfred North Whitehead wrote that he "[held] that by a process of constructive abstraction we can arrive at abstractions which are...simply located bits of material" (Irvine 2015). In this logic, relations with abstract centralization are necessarily material, and must become a point of anxiety because authority constructed on material terms can only intercede into the processes of local ecology. Abstraction cannot take on a complementary valence as *real* on its own *different* terms. For Whitehead, being's essence does not lie in abstraction but in its derivative parts. It is thus no surprise that Arne Næss, influenced by Whitehead, argues that: "the vulnerability of a form of life is roughly proportional to the weight of influences from afar" (Næss 1973, 98). In Næss' view, global abstraction implies a "vulnerability" that leads to local or decentralized imperialism because abstraction is viewed as not real on its own terms. What I contend is that abstraction—originating from centralized governance—is there, along with everywhere else, and that it is real in its own right. Næss mistrusted topological hierarchy for he could only view it on the terms of an embodied hierarchy that necessarily imposed itself into his ecology. To explicate the qualitative difference between these two conceptions of hierarchy, one could offer a system of social organization, that due to varying scales is necessarily hierarchical, but still intrinsically egalitarian at the level of being. It seems though, that deep ecology's material ontology occludes such an organization from view.

The Center is Always There

In Martin Heidegger's 1946 work entitled "What Are Poets For?," he formulated one of his particularly applicable elaborations on the nature of being as it relates to ecology. He writes: "Plant, animal, and man—insofar as they are beings...are ventured" (Heidegger 1971, 100). In this quote, Heidegger—like Næss—argued that plants, animals and man share inherent egalitarian characteristics of being, and are what he calls "ventured," or throw into shared being. He goes on to describe the process of this thrownness: "Being, which holds all beings in the balance, thus always, draws particular beings toward itself—toward itself as a center" (Heidegger 1971, 101). He called this "all-mediating" center "an-unheard of center." He wrote: "The gravity of the pure forces, the unheard-of center, the pure draft, the whole draft, full Nature, Life, the venture—they are all the same" (Heidegger 1971, 103). For Heidegger, these were just many ways of describing shared being. At this point, it is necessary to point out that on many levels, Heidegger's description of being is particularly useful for approaching ecology. Heidegger described intrinsic egalitarianism, he qualified intrinsic relationality, and he affirmed abstraction. However, despite how close he came, he did not affirm the nature of abstract centralized governance that I offer as the *only* solution to the question of ecological being, specifically in the era of climate change. His

“unheard-of-center,” in its gravitational drawing in of being, quite literally mirrored Næss’ metaphorical use of the “net” in deep ecology in that it is decentralized and mimics the function of a net; it contracts being unto itself. As a decentered “everywhere” center that draws being “toward itself,” the “unheard-of-center” has to consistently assert its reality by moving—or drawing—being into itself from the local to a pseudo-global. Heidegger’s ontology obfuscates the obligation of the center to its ecological beings in that it imagines the center as everywhere, but not anywhere. Being is not ascribed to an omnipresent abstraction, but merely an abstract omnipresence. In this way, Heidegger ontology is reminiscent of Næss’ “total-field image,” and to put a finer point on it, the problem with such an image is that it imagines that the center is as elusive as it is abstract. With the “unheard-of center,” Heidegger framed his ontology as a recuperation of being. From “unheard-of-ness,” he wanted being to be heard again. This frame is limiting because approaching the question of centralization in this manner actually obscures the shared being that always persists, whether unearthed or not.

The etymology of “ecology” is the Greek *oikos*, or “dwelling” (Schwarz & Jax 2011, 145-147). This root points to important traces of the shared being referred to above, a being that relies on relational obligations that take the form of social governance. If we were to all look to our dwellings, our ecologies, we will certainly find that they were bought and maintained by money that was issued by the centralized authority of the United States government. Money, in its abstractness, takes the form of the centralized relationality that can engender productive political action everywhere. Look to your wallet, and you will find that you are always hearing about the center. Being is always present. Therefore, when Heidegger frames the recuperation of shared being as a process of revealing what is unheard, he has already given credence to the notion that such a center of being is potentially vanquishable. It will only be when we realize this, and along with it the nature of the centralized governing obligation to all ecological beings, that we will be able to effectively demand that the center owes up to its promise in the form of regulatory protection, technological improvement and productive rehabilitation of the biosphere, all of which become more likely in the era of the green job guarantee. It is clear that the deep ecology movement understands the stakes of this promise, but its core conceptions malign its ability to see beyond the horizon of the local to global trajectory and into an everywhere, all-the-time, local & global contestation.

Ecology as Monetary Governance

Another way of thinking about this argument regarding money and Heideggerian being is through some of the concepts he lays out in his later essay: “The Question Concerning Technology.” Within this essay, he gets at his ontology in a different way. He gets there through technology and causality as they relate to production. He writes: “Wherever ends are pursued and means are employed, wherever instrumentality reigns, there reigns causality” (Heidegger 1977, 2). He argues that this

causality is a four-fold causality that includes the material, the form or category, the end goal, and the means of bringing the production into being. For Heidegger, these four-fold causalities depend on each other in a co-responsibility. This leads to technology's place in all of this. He writes: "Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth" (Heidegger 1977, 5). Evocative of his very ontology, technology is not just a means but a process of revealing being through the co-responsibility of causal instrumentality, or production. He steers the remaining space of this essay in several interesting directions, but I am going to co-opt the structure he uses to get back to my ecological argument and see where money—and thus my centralized topology—fits into this frame. To these ends, Heidegger writes specifically about the production of a single good to theorize how responsibility manifests in production. "The four causes are the ways, all belonging at once to each other, of being responsible for something else," Heidegger writes. He sees being, in production, as the method in which the four causes connect, and "in this connection, [they] bring about means to obtain results, effects" (Heidegger 1977, 3). How do they do this? How do they abstractly connect at a distance all-at-once to obtain results? Given Heidegger's production context, the answer to this question must be money as framed above. Heidegger does not say this explicitly, but he does offer co-responsibility and dependence in his answer, and given the dependence on governance that ecological being mandates, as well as the place of money as the abstract connection to the global and the local all at once, his answer is not wrong; it is however, not completely seen through to its conclusion, specifically as a topology. It is no wonder that Heidegger sees technologically enabled production as evocative of being, because it is quite clear, given the federal inscriptions on our dollar bills that pay for our productive labor, that money, and the governance that enables it, is at the center of social production. Most importantly for any ecological vision, it is at the center of any global ecological intervention. Ecological being is then, in short, money employing resources through governance and technological means to produce socially necessary goods or services that establish inherent ecological egalitarianism.

As Aronoff implies in her piece, the job guarantee, and with it, this topology of centralization is neither formal nor neutral in a Lockean sense. It counters a specific set of malignant circumstances conditioned by neoliberal forces of decentralization that are actively detrimental to our ecological sphere. Among these many detrimental forces is Bitcoin. Bitcoin represents the fantasy of ecological decentralization on money's terms, and has grown exponentially in the last 5 years. Bitcoin—reminiscent of Spinoza and Whitehead—is a commodified abstraction that imagines itself as materially finite. The most obvious resulting problem of this finitude is that Bitcoin makes no sense as a model for a currency, as it is necessarily deflationary. As well, it has no natural constituency, as there are no governing obligations denominated in its unit. Though, its problems go deeper when we consider the ecological realm. As a peer-to-peer system, Bitcoin's network necessarily utilizes "redundancy that implies the storage of all the relevant information of the

network in every peer of the network” (Delgado-Segura et al 2018). In eschewing scaled centralized servers, which minimize redundancy to a few backup servers, Bitcoin’s peer-to-peer storage design is highly inefficient. As well, it heightens ecological waste because it exculpates its storage from the site of network related energy usage. As a result of both its finitude and its network design, it is becoming increasingly costly to mine, with recent reports suggesting astronomical levels of carbon emissions. The yearly total Bitcoin related energy usage is estimated to exceed that of “150 individual countries” (Holthaus 2017). Within this context, money as the spear of this topological intervention is not merely an offer of an arbitrarily ascribed path forward, but like the job guarantee in relationship to the labor market, it represents a specific affront to ontologies that privilege local decentralization over global centralization, ontologies that are only accelerating our ecological disaster in multiple spheres of society.

In highlighting monetary relations, this topology does not conform to many scholars’ conceptions of eco-mediation. An example can be found in the work of noted ecological scholar Sean Cubitt. In his recent book, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies*, he argues that contemporary ecological crisis is the product of monetary incentives. He writes: “Ecological crisis, it is argued here, is not the fault of individuals but of the communicative systems, most of all the tyranny of the economy, of money as the dominant medium of twenty-first century intercourse between humans and our world” (Cubitt 2017, 7). This view is not new by any means. Whether as promulgated by the Franciscan monks of the 13th century, many Marxists over the centuries, or recent tweets from Kanye West, the singling out of money as the source of contemporary ill is a popular trope of our modern context, and at first glance, I understand that perspective. The issuance of money has incentivized extractive economic production for generations, but allowing that trend to solidify into a determined truth is limiting. The issuance of money and the production that it mediates do not have to be directed toward a—to quote Cubitt again—“intercourse between humans and our world.” As a boundless public utility, medium or technology, money incentivizes production at the direction of social governance. The problem with the twenty-first century’s ecological tyranny is not money, but a broader social deficiency that leads to the organization of ecological relations as fundamentally anthropocentric and extractive. It is easy to blame money, but when the problem of our twenty-first century ecology lies in conceptions of being, blaming money does not get us any closer to an ecology of inherent egalitarianism. It is time to reconfigure our ecology through a broader re-imagining of what is possible. The Green New Deal, and with it the job guarantee, represents a meaningful step in that direction.

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