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Ethical placemaking for ecological subjects

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In this chapter I propose that we embrace an ecological conception of persons and, from there, go on to argue that we should understand the fundamental goal of governance in terms of ‘ethical placemaking.’ Next, I suggest considerations that should guide thinking about governance aimed at generating more livable, equitable futures for ecological subjects through placemaking and call for ecological communicative democracy. In the final section, I identify the ethical and political capacities that ought to characterize ecological subjects and conclude by reiterating the central place of care and places of care in nurturing them.

**Ecological subjects-citizens**

The independent human being of reason, a conceived being in terms of self-interested calculation and material acquisition who is traceable through Plato, Augustine, Descartes, and Locke (Taylor, 1989), has been subjected to considerable critique in contemporary philosophy. As feminist and other philosophers, such as Communitarians have argued, this idealized account of persons, with its undue emphasis on independence and rationality, ignores the significance of social structures and the body in our lived experience and shaping of our identities, and obscures our interdependence with others in filial and communal bonds, and essential need for relations of nurturing and care (Sandel, 1992; Tronto, 1994; Meyers, 1997; Kittay, 1999).

Yet, bodies, caring relations, and social structures are still not the whole story for a comprehensive account of our radically relational nature. We are ‘place-lings,’ as Ed Casey puts it, beings who are ‘never without emplaced experiences’ (2009, p. 321). Lorraine Code, highlighting our social and geographical embeddedness, describes us as ‘ecological subjects’ (2006). Rosi Braidotti goes farther still and argues in favor of a ‘zoe-centered subject… [a creature] shot through with relational linkages of the symbiotic, contaminating/viral kind which interconnect it to a variety of others, starting from the environmental or eco-others’ (2013, p. 30). Humans are displaced from center on Braidotti’s ‘bio-egalitarian’ account. Each of these conceptions helps capture our profoundly relational experience and possibilities. In addition to understanding our social situatedness, they reckon with our locatedness: our material and atmospheric emplacement and interdependence with non-human forms of life.

We might think about our embeddedness, or ‘emplacement,’ in at least two ways then: geographical and social. As noted above, feminists and others have written eloquently on our expe-
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Experience as situated within relations of care and dependency and significantly shaped by our membership in communities and by social norms and economic structures (Kittay, 1999; Young, 2011). At the same time, we are emplaced in particular geographic and atmospheric conditions—locatable places—that create the possibility of imagination and thought, survival, flourishing, or failing. Contemporary epistemology, for instance, argues that the environs we inhabit and traverse are integral to the kinds of thinking, knowing creatures we are. Christopher Preston points out that ‘organisms that know things about the world are situated beings, beings cognitively grounded in the worlds from which they speak. An important part of this grounding is a physical location among material realities’ (Preston, 2003, p. xi).

Contemporary research in social epidemiology using realist methods to better understand societal determinants of health inequalities offers grave but abundant evidence that aligns with these philosophical accounts. Studies show that heightened exposure to hazards (industrial and waste, and weak infrastructure), and diminished access to resources of all kinds (social connection, food, health care, parks and other public space, transportation) harm health (Marmot, 2007). Data suggest that people face increasing social isolation and depression, and restricted mobility due in part to the configuration of the built environment (Kelly et al., 2012). The effect of trade agreements and structural adjustment programs on health systems and, more specifically, facilities and their material and human resources also makes clear the essential relationship between place—our embeddedness in it—and the capability to be healthy (Eckenwiler, 2012).

This underscores the fact that where and how we are situated amid social structures has important implications for our level of exposure to health threats and for the distribution of health and illness within a population. Economic status, gender, race and ethnicity, social connectivity, and citizenship/immigration status all figure in the development and persistence of health inequalities for they operate to locate people in precarious environs such as low-income coastal or dense urban settings. Even ‘natural’ events like heat waves, famines, and tsunamis, which occur in and affect specific places and people are, in part, attributable to social practices and policy choices. Climate emergency is an especially compelling case of the significance of geographical and social embeddedness for health, for as Marmot notes, ‘the poor, the geographically vulnerable, the politically weak, and other disadvantaged groups will be most affected’ (2007, p. 1156). This belies one further fiction found within the inherited view of subjects: that we are roughly equal or similarly situated.

A final underappreciated dimension of our relational nature that requires a reconceived subject is what geographers call the ‘inter-subjectivity’ of place (Massey, 2004), the idea that we are constitutive of one another’s identities and environs. Code underscores this in arguing that we are ‘made by and making [our] relations in reciprocity with other subjects and with… (multiple, diverse) locations’ (2006, p. 128). Seeing not only our personhood and identities but also place in relational terms, as intersubjectively constructed ‘highlights the multiplicity of locations [and] the variety of interactions between people who are located differently that go into making places’ (Raghuram, Madge, and Noxolo et al., 2009, p. 8). As Iris Young puts it, we ‘dwell together in’ complex and causal relations of interdependence and in specific atmospheric and material conditions (2000, p. 224). The ethical import of these ideas is that we contribute to the construction of place, ours and others’—often unintentionally—through actions and interactions within a larger context of transnational social structures and processes that serve to enable some people in the realization of their capacities, yet constrain others. These considerations point to the necessity of reimagining our conception of subjects as ecological: embodied, embedded beings who dwell in dense relations with others, including non-human forms of life, all of whom are in need of care and place for the sake of sustenance.
Toward ethical placemaking and equitable cohabitation

Thinking about persons ecologically suggests we should resist a reductive, decontextualized view of individuals as the units of moral and political concern, for we cannot properly be conceived apart from our embeddedness. Social and political responsibility, on this view, might be conceived in terms of ‘ethical placemaking,’ a phrase first coined by geographers Raghuram, Made, and Noxolo (2009). Place is not a fixed or merely an external thing (Casey, 1997). It can be understood as being around us, but also in and with us (Casey, 1999). The examples above point to tracts of land, waterways, worksites, dwellings, neighborhoods, hubs and vehicles of transportation, hospitals and clinics (or their remnants), bedrooms and bathrooms, kitchens, food markets, makeshift housing, bodies and psyches. They gesture toward what can be called ‘transnational space,’ which includes, for instance, places of transition for nomads, refugees, and migrant workers – such as borders and immigration offices – or for people getting to and from work and other responsibilities, and places where economic transactions occur amid dense, global financial relations and processes.

To return to the geographers’ point on intersubjectivity, places are, in Massey’s words, ‘constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus. [E]ach ‘place’ can be seen as a particular, unique point of… intersection’ (1991, p. 28). Its specificity is its set and configuration of relations and its position within a wider web of social relations. Moreover, because they are shaped by social interactions, places, like subjects, have plural, shifting ‘identities.’ They also become, endure and evolve; they are not static.

But what do I mean by ‘ethical placemaking’? Placemaking is a set of practices that brings together architects, urban planners, and designers intent on transforming neighborhoods, parks and paths, features of landscape, housing developments, streetscapes, long-term care facilities, and hospitals (Project for Public Spaces, 2016; Silberberg, 2013). Public health leaders point to place-based interventions as ‘the new frontier’ (Amaro, 2014) and it is on the agendas of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2012), the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2014), even the World Bank (Zhan, 2016). It also figures prominently in a growing number of international documents and declarations including the Sustainable Development Goals (2015) and the UN Habitat’s New Urban Agenda (2016).

Elsewhere I have interpreted ethical placemaking – grounded in an ecological conception of persons – as a core component of an enabling, capabilities-oriented, conception of justice (Eckenwiler 2012, 2016, 2018). These conceptions of justice aim at attending to the social and political conditions that support people’s capacities for self-development and self-determination. Iris Marion Young’s theory of justice as enablement calls for reform of the social and institutional structures that systematically constrain people’s capacities for self-development and self-determination (2011). Another example is Carol Gould’s notion of justice as ‘equal positive freedom,’ which requires not only the absence of constraining conditions such as coercion and oppression but also access to the means or conditions for ‘self-transformation’ and the development of capacities and the realization of projects over time. Justice, here too, is about ‘the availability of enabling [my emphasis] conditions’ for individuals (Gould, 2009). Finally, the widely known capabilities approach, developed by Sen and Nussbaum (2006) emphasizes that support for the realization of key functionings and capabilities is a matter of justice for people everywhere.

Ethical placemaking, I have argued, first involves a negative condition: it takes care to avoid creating, through our actions, interactions, practices, and policies, conditions of deprivation. Conditions of deprivation are those that make it impossible to support and sustain the capacities of social, corporeal creatures whose vulnerability comes from a need for care across the
lifespan and also fit within specific atmospheric and material environments. Furthermore, it requires: nurturing relations of care and interdependence; protecting bodily integrity; supporting autonomy, not interpreted in terms of individual self-reliance, but in the relational sense that sees us as originating, persisting, and flourishing within relations of care and interdependence, given ongoing opportunities for self-directed thought and action; promoting stability and a sense of rootedness and, at the same time, supporting generative movement; and finally, where necessary responding to inequities (Eckenwiler, 2016, 2018). The specific targets of intervention are the social processes and practices that create and sustain deprivation and inequality – for ecological subjects and their habitats. The precise meanings of these elements should be worked out in overlapping political processes. While we begin from a theory of needs, human and other, we should shift our attention toward the habitats – and this is key – all of which are distinct, dynamic in the sense of unfixed, and intersecting – where people dwell and move about, for their own particular and shared purposes. If the scope of ethics and politics includes creating enabling conditions for ecological subjects and thus promoting ethical placemaking, what are ideal forms of governance? I now turn to this question.

**Models of governance for ethical placemaking**

The perils of interest group democracy have been well-highlighted by political philosophers (Young, 1996), so I will not dedicate time to those criticisms here. An ecological version of deliberative democracy might serve as a more ethical alternative to the primacy of a materialistic and consumptive notion of interests. Yet, critics are wary of its potential for perpetuating exclusions and inequalities given its potential to: (1) privilege certain forms and styles of expression (the impartial expert’s for instance) and thus discount some contributions and forms of expression sometimes discounted as less credible (storytelling, for example); (2) assume that people are sufficiently symmetrical and that they can reverse perspectives, thus obscuring morally relevant differentiation and particularity in aiming for ‘unity,’ the ‘common good,’ and ‘shared meaning;’ and (3) obscure other possible objectives in political engagement such as recognition or understanding (Young, 1996).

Communicative democracy may better advance efforts to address exclusion and inequality (Young, 2000). On this model of democratic governance, moral and political engagement should be understood as largely dialogical; decisions emerge from the interactions of a plurality of subjects. Communicative democracy does not privilege impartiality but instead, drawing from standpoint epistemology, identifies and incorporates partialities in generating social knowledge to inform decisions. Instead of discounting or being suspicious about the value of personal narratives, for example, it regards them as resources. For ecological subjects, indeed, meanings and expressions of wellbeing, of harm, and so forth are situated, socially and ecologically. Rather than aiming for unity, this model of democratic governance aims for recognition and understanding. Participants express their experiences and perspectives so that others situated differently can learn how it is for them, what the meaning of events, experiences, any given policy is, and perhaps transform accepted knowledge to reshape preferences, even identities. Communicative democracy can also better acknowledge that there may be different understandings of what it is to cooperate or to justify decisions, of what emancipation itself means. Such democracy can embrace different kinds of sites for generating ideas: chosen, even oppositional communities (not those invoked by communitarians), street protests, and marginalized social networks.

Ecological communicative democracy, as I describe it here, goes beyond feminist standpoint theory in situating knowers and knowledge-production efforts in particular places – socially and geographically shaped habitats – and conceives of them as
intersecting… with other locations and their occupants…. It maps locations of knowledge production and demographics of knowledge producers… [and] considers the specificities of the ‘habitat’ conditions and the inhabitants within and surrounding each location, to discern where analogies can be drawn and where exposed dis-analogies demand acknowledgment and/or rethinking.

(Code, 2006, p. 52)

Code invokes James Cheney’s notion of the bioregional narrative as an essential instrument in facilitating epistemic responsibility, which lies at the core of democratic governance. A bioregional narrative is one ‘grounded in geography rather than in a linear, essentialized, narrative self’ (Cheney, 1989). Its aim is to ‘map ecological relations to discern conditions for mutually sustaining lives within a specific locality… or the interrelations among them [my emphasis]’ (Code, 2006, pp. 59–60).

Given the nature of ecological subjects, then, ecological communicative democracy, in part through tools like bioregional narratives, aims to produce responsible, epistemically just (Fricker, 2007) assessments of the habitability of particular conditions. Crucially, responding to the inter-subjectivity of placemaking and in turn, inequities generated, it also aims to assess these conditions in relation to the conditions in which others dwell (Eckenwiler, 2018). The essential questions under ecological communicative democracy become: ‘What would ethical placemaking mean here, or here, and where they intersect?’ and ‘What is necessary for promoting mutually sustaining, equitable lives?’

**Essential capacities for ethical placemaking**

If we are to advance from being a people of competitive consumption into ecological subjects working toward ethical placemaking, what sorts of capacities should characterize us? What should be cultivated among us in order that we become and endure in mutually sustaining, equitable relations of cohabitation? Given the concerns raised in the previous section, what capacities might move us toward ideal – that is, maximally inclusive, participatory, and fair – forms of governance?

For humans as ecological subjects, the givens are our embodiment, interdependence, and locatedness. Essential to this understanding of persons, then, is respect for our animality (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 54). This has the benefit not only of ‘acknowledging that there are many types of dignity in the world’; it also helps to account for our relationality and embeddedness in habitats in a way that the undue emphasis on reason as the principal, if not sole, source of dignity cannot. Additionally, it captures the idea that we consume and excrete, relying on the resources around us in order to be and persist. Rather than starting from an assumption of disinterest in others, ecological subjects, as interdependent, should nurture their capacities for recognition of: an individual’s unique identity as an autonomous individual; persons as belonging to particular communities or groups; others’ needs for relationships, both interpersonal and associative; and finally, of the places and the conditions in which people dwell and their need for fit (Eckenwiler, 2018).

Ideally, ecological subjects should cultivate a disposition toward empathy. In Gould’s formulation, empathy ‘signifies a feeling or imaginative identification with another and that other’s perspective and situation’ (2007, p. 251). While the notions of ‘identification,’ ‘mutuality,’ or ‘fellow feeling’ are ethically perilous given social and ecological differentiation and asymmetries, the practice of seeking knowledge of another’s situation, listening carefully, and trying to develop feeling for people’s expressions about their particular plight – which may well intersect with
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Ours and that of people we know – has value for promoting understanding and realizing justice (hooks, 2009). Instead of taking for granted that we are acquisitive creatures, we should call for privileging critical acquisition. Starting from an expectation of acquisition, then, we should scrutinize what and how much we are trying to get our hands on, not to mention how we are going about it, whether the resource will continue to have generative capacity, and so forth.

Being able to take the long view (temporal and spatial, across terrains and timeframes) is an essential capacity for ecological subjects. For it allows for identifying effects and their sources that may not be readily apparent, and for envisioning interventions that can be sustained over time. In taking the long view, ecological thinking can be understood as emphasizing the future over the past and present. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, unless we develop concepts of time and duration that ‘welcome and privilege the future, we will remain closed to understanding the complex processes of becoming that engender and constitute both life and matter’ (1999, p. 16). This capacity holds ethical import. Informing our prevailing conception of responsibility is a specific phenomenology of agency that emphasizes, or ‘gives experiential primacy,’ to short-term effects rather than to remote ones. Thus, when consequences or outcomes are generated by an (often wide) array of agents and unfold over time, our sense of agency diminishes; that is, we see ourselves as implicated very little, if at all (Young, 2004). Ecological subjects should have a sense, then, of individuality but also of solidaristic and long-reaching agency.

Finally, ecological subjects should cultivate critical social reflexivity. This is crucial for purposes of assessing our situatedness, the nature and extent of our connections, and, in turn, our responsibilities. While a fuller discussion is beyond the scope of my project here, elsewhere I argue in favor of the view that differences in the nature and degree of these responsibilities align with how one is situated within the structural processes that organize society (and that can generate injustice) and the geography of intersecting, interdependent ecosystems (Eckenwiler, 2012). Moreover, picking up on the earlier reference to solidarity, I have argued that solidaristic recognition requires appreciation of one’s contribution to the unsustainable conditions in which others dwell (Eckenwiler, 2018). As a final consideration, it warrants repeating that the work of care is crucial to the foundations of social organization and cooperation in part because it creates the next generation of citizens and shapes their capacities: corporeal, social, intellectual, ethical, and political. If ecological civic engagement is to thrive, societies must thoroughly and effectively support those who work to generate it and attend to the conditions in which it occurs (Christopherson, 2006; Herd and Meyer, 2006).

Conclusion

I have argued that we should embrace a conception of persons as ecological subjects and transform politics into an endeavor aimed at ethical placemaking for the sake of more livable and, above all, just futures. Stated differently, justice requires that we target for reform the social processes and practices that create and sustain deprivation and inequality – for ecological subjects and their habitats – and work to create the conditions and kinds of dwellings and habitats that support relations of care; protect bodily integrity; nurture autonomy; promote stability and generative movement; and finally, respond to inequities (Eckenwiler, 2016, 2018). My focus in this chapter has been on humans, yet, these reflections may well press us further, toward a post-human conception of subjects and perhaps even a ‘bio-centered egalitarianism’ (Braidotti, 2013, p. 19) that shifts humans from the center and assigns value more generously to non-human forms of life. This goes beyond my scope here, however. For present purposes, my modest claim is that we must reckon more thoroughly with our radically relational subjectivity in formulating accounts of what justice requires.
References


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