WENDELL BERRY'S CONCEPTION OF KNOWLEDGE -- AND HIS COMMUNITARIAN, ECOLOGICAL WORLDVIEW

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Wendell Berry is a visionary critic of modern, industrial society who is deeply concerned with – and knowledgeable about – education. For more than a decade his views have been presented to philosophers of education, notably through the writings of Madhu Prakash of Pennsylvania State University. Most OVPES (Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society) members are familiar with Prakash's work, especially her excellent 1994 article titled "What Are People For: Wendell Berry on Education, Ecology and Culture", (*Educ. Theory*, Vol.44, Spring 1994, pp. 135-157).

A theme of this year's OVPES meeting is the unique contribution that philosophy of education can make to conceptualizing and coping with the human condition in post 9/ll America. Guided by that theme, this paper contends that post 9/11 America and American education would benefit greatly from Wendell Berry's worldview and, in particular, from his conception of knowledge and education. Berry is widely recognized as an influential voice of ecological conservation and agrarianism, who has expressed his views in widely read essays, novels, short stories, plays and poetry. What does not seem to be as well appreciated is that his ecological concerns are only one element – albeit a very important element – of his moral, ethical worldview – a worldview whose touchstone is the *wellbeing* of individuals, families, communities, and ecologies – viewed as inseparable, organically nested systems. Shortly after September 11 of 2001, Berry wrote an essay titled "Thoughts In The Presence of Fear," in which he discussed how the horrific events of that day relate to the worldview of modern, scientific, technological, industrial society. Much of that essay was foreshadowed by a longer, more detailed 1991 essay which related the Modern Worldview of American society to America's 1991 Gulf War against Iraq. It is equally applicable to the present war against Osama bin Ladin's Al Quaida and to the pre-emptive war that President Bush is committed to waging against Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Its title was "Peaceableness Toward Enemies: Some Notes on the Gulf War" (in *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community; Eight Essays*, Pantheon Books, 1992).

In the more recent essay of 2001 Berry wrote: "The time will soon come when we will not be able to remember the horrors of September 11 without remembering, also the unquestioning technological and economic optimism that ended on that day. This optimism rested on the proposition that we were living in a 'new world order' that would 'grow' on and on, bringing a prosperity of which every new increment would be unprecedented. The dominant politicians, corporate officers, and investors who believed this proposition did not

acknowledge that the prosperity was limited to a tiny percent of the world's people, and to an ever smaller number of people even in the United States; that it was founded upon the oppressive labor of poor people all over the world; and that its ecological costs increasingly threatened all lives, including the lives of the supposedly prosperous... There was, as a consequence, a growing worldwide effort on behalf of economic decentralization, economic justice, and ecological responsibility. We must recognize that the events of September 11 make this effort more necessary than ever. We citizens of the industrial countries must continue the labor of self-criticism and self-correction. We must recognize our mistakes." (Berry, 2001, pg. 4)

The mistakes that Berry refers to flow, in large part, from the Modern Worldview and its conception of knowledge that dominates and guides American society, including our schools and universities. Berry concludes this essay with his own conception of knowledge and education. He writes:

> The complexity of our present trouble suggests as never before that we need to change our present concept of education. Education is not properly an industry, and its proper use is not to serve industries, neither by job-training nor by industry-subsidized research. Its proper use is to enable citizens to live lives that are economically, politically, socially and culturally responsible. This cannot be done by gathering or "accessing" "information", which is to say, facts without context and therefore without priority. A proper education enables young people to put their lives in order, which means knowing what things are more important than other things; it means putting first things first. (Berry, 2001, pg. 4)

Continuing this theme, the focus of this paper is Berry's conception of knowledge and education.

Types of Worldview

Although Berry's worldview is uniquely his own, it is representative of a particular type of worldview which is here called the *Communal Worldview* and which contrasts with two other contemporary types of Worldview, here called the *Technological Worldview* and the *Manichaean Worldview*.

These three kinds of worldviews are constructed, ideal types that, although implied in Berry's writing, are not explicitly differentiated or labeled as types by him -- perhaps because artists don't like typologies. For the purpose of comparing Berry's worldview with others, however, it is useful in this paper, to construct or differentiate these three different ideal types.[1]

A Worldview has two primary aspects or components: (i) an *Ethos* which consists of a person's basic attitudes and values, and (ii) a *Mythos* which consists of a person's basic cognitive concepts. A Mythos justifies and supports its associated Ethos, and is much like what Richard Rorty calls a Final Vocabulary. An adequate description of the three worldviews differentiated here – Communal, Technological, and Manichaean – would require a separate article or book. Therefore, each is here identified only impressionistically by listing some of the constituent attitudes and values of its Ethos and some cognitive concepts of its Mythos.

Characteristics of Berry's Communitarian Worldview

The Communitarian Worldview is similar to Martin Buber's I-Thou relation. It identifies with and feels responsible to a community. It is trustful and optimistic. It is nurturing and caring. It is emotionally responsive and empathic. It is dialogical, open, accepting of nature and the natural, tolerant of differences and of ambiguity.

Berry's Worldview is like other Communitarian Worldviews in the above respects, but it is unique in the degree to which it recognizes and values the inter-locking connectedness of individuals, families, communities, and ecologies.

The *Well-being* of these organically interlocking systems is Berry's primary criterion – his touchstone -- of ethical/moral goodness and rightness.

Characteristics of the Technological Worlview

The Technological Worldview is similar to Martin Buber's I-It relations. It is characterized by striving for power, control, and efficiency. It is Promethean, Faustian, and masculine. It is rational, cognitive, scientific, technological, industrial.

Characteristics of the Manichean Worldview[2]

The Manichean Worldview is characterized by a perception of the human and superhuman worlds as divided into two classes: Us vs. Them, Good vs. Evil. It is distriustful, fearful, paranoid alienated, suspicious. It is vengeful, violent, hostile, intolerant of differences and of ambiguity. It is authoritarian, patriarchal, macho. It uses psychological defense mechanisms that distort perception of reality to an extreme degree.

These three types of Worldview are universal, in that each exists (actually or potentially) to some degree, in everyone. Individuals and groups differ greatly, however, in (i) the frequency and the length of time that each Worldview characterizes or governs an individual's personality, and (ii) the degree to which each type of Worldview is an ideal that a person consciously strives to actualize. A person or group will be said to have a particular Worldview if that Worldview

governs their personality most of the time and/or if they consciously strive to have that Worldview. Each Worldview can be viewed as being appropriate for a particular kind of situation. Thus, the Communal Worldview is appropriate for the private, communal realm of family and friends in which external threat is minimal. The Technological Worldview is appropriate for the public realm of economics and politics in which competition and conflict may be relatively intense. The Manichaean Worldview is appropriate for situations of great perceived danger, of war against enemies.

Wendell Berry's Conception of Knowledge and Education

The following six propositions summarize Berry's Communal Worldview conception of knowledge and education, including how it differs from that of the Technological Worldview's conception.

Proposition #1. Knowledge (both scientific and non-scientific) is an integral part of its contexts – including its origins, its uses, and its consequences. It cannot be conceptually separated from its contexts without distorting its meaning Consequently, knowledge is permeated with values which it embodies and fosters.

Proposition #2. The modern worldview's assumption that scientific knowledge and technology are value free is unwarrented. Denying or ignoring the relationship between scientific knowledge and its contexts – by "abstracting" or "bracketing" knowledge – may hide (but cannnot eliminate) the values that permeate it. The specialization ofdisciplines and professions is a way that responsibility is commonly avoided for the negative effects of knowledge and for the advice of specialized experts.

Proposition #3. The net effect of scientific knowledge and scientific technology, guided by the Technological Worldview, is the destruction of individuals, communities, and ecologies – which is commonly denied by labeling it as unavoidable "side effects". Under perceived threat, the Technological Worldview's attitude of indifference to such destruction is commonly combined with the Manichaean (Us vs. Them) attitude of active violence against "Them", the enemy. In war, such Manichaean indifference is commonly labeled "collateral damage".

Proposition #4. American schools and universities are guided and controlled by the Modern Worldview and its conception of knowledge. The primary subject matter of schools and Universities (including scientific resarch) should be knowledge that is permeated and combined with values and purposes that foster the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and ecological systems.

Berry's criterion for the wellbeing of students is the degree to which they:

i) learn to live lives that are economically, politically, socially and culturally responsible

ii) learn to "stand by their words – to say what they mean, and mean what they say

iii) learn to become citizens who live lives that are economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible.

Proposition #5. Educators should devote their talents and energies to: (i) understanding the values taught and learned in schools and universities; and (ii) developing schools in which the curriculum promotes the well-being of individuals, communities, and ecologies

Proposition #6. The explicit purpose of schools should be the promotion of the Well-being of students – and, through them, the Well-being of the families, communities, and ecologies of which they should be an integral part. Educators should be aware of the causal interconnectedness of individuals (both students and teachers) with their families, communities,and ecologies. Educators should identify with, and be committed to, the communities and individuals they serve. They should not be "specialists" whose identity and commitment is somewhere else. They should not be absentee technical advisors and decision makers who feel little or no responsibility to their local community, but identify primarily with an academic discipline or some other distant authority. Teachers and other educators should engage in what Neil Postman calls "Subversive Activities – activities that subvert the Technological and the Manichaean Worldviews.

Value Aspects of Knowledge and Technology

Berry's criticism of the claim that scientific knowledge is objective and value-free has much in common with the post-modern views of Richard Rorty and of Clifford Geertz that all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is "local knowledge" – that knowledge is valid and applicable only in situations that are like the social/cultural, value-laden situation in which it was formulated. Therefore, all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is contingent upon values in its formulation and in its applications. Berry presents cases that illustrate the following aspects of this thesis for *scientific* knowledge.

Aspect #1 Selection of the Phenomena to be Studied

Values are involved in the selection of phenomena for scientific study. For example, Berry cites decisions of researchers in State Colleges of Agriculture (including the University of Kentucky) to study and develop technologies that benefit large farms and machine technology rather than labor intensive small farms – for example methods of bundling tobacco.

Aspect #2 Selection of Variables and their measures

Values are the primary determinants of which variables will be studied, and how they will be measured. As an example of this, Berry cites the economic cost-benefit analysis of a small dairy-farm made by two agricultural economists. In this analysis the primary dependent variable (as might be expected) was the net annual production measured in gallons of milk and in dollars of income. The dollar costs of inputs--feed, machinery, electricity, gasoline, transportation, wage labor, etc. – are, of course, included in the analysis. But the analysis omits variables representing the quality of life of the farm family, the animals, the community, or the effects on the land and the ecology. Quality of life variables are excluded from the analysis because they are not part of the "domain" of agricultural economics – that is, they do not directly effect the monetary profit of the farm. The effects of (and on) these "qualitative" variables – are called "externalized costs"in the jargon of economic theory. Such "qualitative" costs are of no interest to economists because are bourne by people and things that are intentionally kept outside the domain of agricultural economics.

Aspect #3. The Funding of Research Topics

Most scientific knowledge requires money – for the training and hiring of scientists and assistants, for laboratories and equipment, for data collection and analysis, etc. Since WW II most funding for scientific research has come from Federal Government grants, or corporations. Much of the actual research is done in Universities for whom these grants are a major source of income. The values and the purposes of corporations and government agencies determine which phenomena will be studied and which will, consequently, have high status as the "cutting edge" of scientific knowledge.

Aspect #4. The Uses of Scientific Knowledge

In Berry's view, scientific knowledge and scientific technology cannot be separated from their uses--by whom and for what purposes. Those who claim that scientific knowledge is value-free imagine that there is a sharp line between scientific knowledge and its uses. They contend, for example, that the scientific knowledge generated in the creation of the atomic bomb is separate from the values and purposes for which the government funded the research at Oak Ridge and Los Alamos; they separate their scientific knowledge from the values involved in the decision to drop the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Robert Oppenheimer and others involved in the creation of the atomic bomb, and some of the crew of the Enola Gay, the airplane that dropped the bombs, suffered lifelong agony because they saw no such line. Whether or not one can see the line depends on one's values, one's worldview.

Aspect #5. The Specialization of Scientific Disciplines

Each specialized, empirical science discipline and profession marks out a domain of phenomena, variables and measures which it claims and defends as its own turf. When the scientific knowledge and technology developed by the accredited members of a discipline is applied to a situation, variables outside of the domain are omitted and negative effects of the application are dismissed as "side effects" for which the discipline and its members disclaim responsibility. Berry cites a number of examples of such avoidance of responsibility, including the actions,inactions and obfuscating P.R. statements of members of the Nuclear Regulatory Comission during the meltdown crisis of the Three Mile Island Nuclear Reactor Plant in 1979. ("Standing By Words", pp. 37-42)

Aspect #6. The Community Identity and Commitment of Scientific Experts

A value that is central in Berry's worldview is a sense of responsibility toward, and identification with, one's community--and with anyone for whom one has (or assumes) advisory or decision-making powers. Berry contends that scientific experts, claiming to know how to remedy the problems of individuals, schools, or communities should have such a sense of responsibility toward and identification with their "clients". But scientific experts seldom identify with the people they advise or make professional decisions for. Their scientific knowledge is not accompanied by a sense of responsibility based on their being part of the community they advise. The status of being a scientific expert typically gives the specialist/expert a sense of being apart from – and better than – the individuals and communities he advises and makes decisions for.

Wendell Berry's Contribution to Post 9/11 Worldviews

Elements of Berry's Worldview are shared by many philosophers of education. Presenting his ideas and attitudes to an OVPES meeting is, therefore, much like "carrying coals to Newcastle". For example:

1. Postmodern thinkers share Berry's opposition to the Modern, Worldview – in particular, to its claim that scientists possesses "objective," "value-free" knowledge, that science will generate limitless material abundance, and that science will bring unending social progress.

2. Existentialists share Berry's focus on ethical values and attitudes, free choice and responsibility – as opposed to the preoccupation of many non-existentialist philosophers with epistemology and metaphysics. Many existentialists (such as Camus, Sartre, Marcel and Buber,) have, like Berry, expressed their values, attitudes, and ideas in the art and rhetoric of novels, drama and poetry.

3. Dewey Pragmatists share, with Berry, a concern for the practical solution of social problems – a preference for the "big picture" as opposed to ivory tower specializations that focus on narrowly defined concepts and problems in what

Thomas Kuhn calls "normal sciences". In addition to such shared elements, Berry's Worldview also includes elements that – although not incompatible with contemporary Philosophy of Education – are not in its mainstream. These include such elements as: a) Emphasis on the organic connectness of individuals, families, communities, ecologies; b) The view that small communities and the ecological regions of which they are a part should be economically self-sufficient -- not controlled by or dependent on the centralized authority of governments or mega-corporations; c) Emphasis on conservation, on simple life styles and on the traditional work ethic of independent small farmers, craftsmen, and artisans; d) Recognition of how easily the Technological Worldview is combined with – and is transformed into a Manichaean Worldview that sees threatening enemies everywhere and defends itself with paranoid counter-violence.

4. Wendell Berry is a humanist and traditionalist. His worldview is expressed in the Western literary tradition of Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, the Bible, and classic writer-thinkers back to Homer and the classic Greek drama. He loves and respects the powers of language and thinks that its primary and proper use is to speak the truth and to, thereby, strengthen authentic character and community.

His writings embody the dictum: "Speak Truth to Power!"

The introductory paragraphs of Berry's essay "Standing By Words" express his view of the intimate relation between character, community and language. He writes:

> Two epidemic illnesses of our time... are the disintegration of communities and the disintegration of persons. That these two are related is clear enough... What seems not so well understood is the relations between these disintegrations and the disintegration of language. The increasing unreliability of language parallels the increasing disintegration of persons and communities." ("Standing By Words", pg. 24)

In the aftermath of September ll, an important contribution that philosophers of education can make to American education and society is to bring Berry's communal, ecological Worldview into the discipline's mainstream.

Epilogue: Criticisms of Berry's Worldview

Criticism #1. Critics of Berry's Worldview claim that it idealizes and romanticizes the small town, agricultural communities of 19th century America – the world of his parents and grandparents. It glosses over the negative features of that society – features such as: a) its economic/technological inefficiency; b) its provincial ethnocentrism – its ignorance of the wider world and of Western intellectual history and traditions; c) its subordination and restriction of women;

d) its social/economic class and caste systems that exploited and oppressed Afro-Americans and other minorities; e) its destruction of ecological systems; f) the economic and intellectual poverty of its schools.

Criticism #2. Berry's Worldview requires abandonment of a century of technological progress that has transformed American society for the better – its agriculture, industry, commerce, government, family structure, etc. He ignores the economic, technological, and social benefits that modern industrial society has brought to many (or most) Americans.

Criticism #3. Berry exaggerates and catastrophizes the negative features of industrial/technological society, including a) ecological destruction; b) breakdowns in family and social relations with resultant increased sense of alienation; c) the concentration of anti-democratic power in global industrial/financial corporations and in centralized government; d) the increasing destructiveness of weapons of mass destruction; e) increasing ethnic/national conflicts and genocides, aggravated by economic globalization. Berry dismisses the possibility that such problems can be remedied by improved technology.

Criticism #5. Berry does not consider the prohibitive costs – in dollars and in social disorganization – of trying to turn modern industrial society back into what it was technologically a century ago.

In brief, Berry's critics claim that: 1) Berry glosses over the defects of 19th century agricultural communities; 2) he exaggerates the defects of contemporary industrial society, and 3) he proposes Luddite, anti-technology remedies that could not possibly be realized.

Rejoinder to Criticisms

The claim that Berry idealizes and romanticizes small town, agricultural communities of the 19th Century misinterprets his work. It ignores most of his writing, its genres and contexts, and the development, over time, of his worldview. Berry does not claim that the rural, small-town life of his parents was a utopia. To the contrary, life there was a mixture of joy and sorrow, success and failure, renewal and decay, birth and death. It was representative of the human condition as portrayed in mainstream worldviews of the Western Tradition – philosophical, religious and literary. In Berry's worldview, the course of human societies is cyclical through time, as in classic Greek thought. It is not a linear, upward progression, culminating in modern industrial society, as the Technological Worldview assumes. Berry's semi-autobiographical novels, short stories and poetry do not portray family, friends, and neighbors as members of a utopian community – but, rather, as imperfect humans who struggled together for meaning, integrity, and hope – in the face of their human frailties and the world's harsh realities. But, on balance, Berry sees more positives than negatives in

agricultural communities whose way of life fosters (even though it does not guarantee) the wellbeing of individuals, families, communities, and ecologies.

In the destruction of agricultural communities by global agribusinesses, centralized government, scientific technology, and the military-industrial complex, Berry describes how the positive characteristics of agricultural communities have been lost – but not replaced by modern, urban, industrial society where power and control take priority over the wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and ecologies.

When Berry compares 19th century agricultural communities with contemporary industrial society he sees and deplores such negative trends as: (1) the destruction of ecologies; (2) anti-democratic concentrations of economic, political, and military power; (3)consumerism; (4) waste; (5) poverty; (6) alienation; (7) a lack of authentic community; and (8) the paranoid hubris of the powerful and affluent. But Berry does not say, nor imply – as his critics contend – that a return to 19th century technology and small farms would, in itself, remedy these negative trends of industrial society. Berry is not a technological determinist – he is a moralist who is concerned, above all, with personal character and the human spirit. He contends that technology does not exist separate from its ethical/moral aspects – the motives and the principles that guide its development and uses. Berry's complaint against modern technology is directed, primarily, against the Technological worldview -- the ethical and moral values (or absence of values) that motivate and guide technology's development and its uses. The primary values and motives of contemporary industrial society – power and control – are the means by which dominant elites exploit underclasses and defeat their "enemies." The primary value in Berry's worldview is the indivisible wellbeing of individuals, families communities and ecologies. Technology should be guided by – and used in the service of – the moral/ religious values that are at the center of his Communitarian Worldview. Technology should not be guided by – nor used to implement – the anti-democratic, anti-humane values of industrial society's elites – power, control, security, and dominance.

Contrary to the misperceptions of his critics, Berry is not opposed to better, more efficient technologies. But he raises the question: "Better and more efficient for *what* purposes – and for *whom*?" He argues, compellingly, that alternative technologies could (and should) be created and used to further the wellbeing of *all* individuals, families, communities, and ecologies.

Berry's critics contend that technological solutions for the ecological and societal destruction resulting from modern technology will be found – if and when they are really needed. But what is the basis of such optimism? What evidence is there that technological remedies will be found, *after* these catastrophies have occurred – catastrophies such as, global warming, loss of

rain forests, insufficient topsoil and fresh water, pollution of the oceans by nuclear waste, and wars with weapons of mass destruction? Contrary to the optimistic expectations of Berry's critics, a common response of power elites to perceived dangers, both ecological and human, is to add a Manichaean element to their Technological Worldview – to find enemies to blame and to make pre-emptive, first strike wars such as the current war on Iraq, officially announced by the Bush Administration as the first action in a war against "terrorism," "evil," and "rogue states" which will continue until America has achieved total victory.

There is no reason to think that the responses to perceived threats and catastrophies by America's future power elites will be any less Manichaean than the responses of America's current governing elite to the catastrophe of September 11, 2001. Given the Technological/Manichaean Worldview of power elites in industrial societies we may expect responses that are at least as violent and paranoid as the current efforts by America's governing power-elites to create an American empire that will control the world militarily and economically – while domestically they undermine civil liberties, weaken the judicial and legislative branches of government, facilitate the destruction of ecologies, reduce Federal social and educational programs, cut the taxes of the wealthy, and facilitate the creation of TV, radio, and newspaper monopolies that disseminate propaganda for consumerism and the political/economic status-quo.

Wendell Berry sees that such actions and policies are guided by, and implement, the Technological/Manichaean Worldview – for which he proposes no quick or easy fix – no utopian solution. But amelioration is possible, he believes, if people resist the Technological/Manichaean Worldview of the power elites and move toward the adoption of a Communitarian/Ecological Worldview whose primary value is the wellbeing of all humanity and of the ecological biosphere of which we are an integral part.

Notes

1. This typology of Worldviews is very similar to the I-Thou vs. I-It distinction of the Jewish philosopher/theologian, Martin Buber. It differs, however, in that the three worldviews identified here do not use religious language; they make no reference to a supernatural/transcendent realm or aspect. The Communitarian Worldview corresponds to what Buber calls I-Thou relationships; the Technological Worldview corresponds to what he calls I-It relationships.

The Manichaean Worldview is a Technological Worldview that has become paranoid and violent under perceived threat of danger from an "enemy," real or imagined. It often becomes so obsessively focused on punishing/defeating the "enemy," – on victory and winning – that the original causes of the conflict become secondary or irrelevant. The Manichaean Worldview has much in

common with what Horkheimer and Adorno call the the Authoritarian (or fascist) personality, and with what Martin Marty has found to be characteristic of the worldviews of extreme religious Fundamentalism Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu A Manichaean Worldview does not necessarily include a religious mythos, but it commonly does.

2. The term *Manichaean* is adapted from the Manichee religion whose basic tenent is that the Universe consists of two eternally conflicting principles – Good and Evil. Much (perhaps most) Christian theology has a strong Manichaean component in that Evil/Satan is viewed as very powerful and as perpetually warring against God and the Good.

The term *paranoid* refers to the tendency to over-react to what is perceived (often misperceived) as the hostile intent of others and to respond with disproportionate violence/revenge. Paranoia is usually Manichaean. It is manifested in the attitude and expression, "They are either with me or against me."

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