On the Genealogy of Ecological Sensibilities: Three Notes

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> It falls to us now to go on thinking:...what is this "civilization" in which we find ourselves?
> (Woolf, 187)

> This revolution must not be exclusively concerned with visible relations of force on a grand scale, but will also take into account molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence and desire.
> (Guattari, 28)

> We believe that feelings are immutable, but every sentiment, particularly the noblest and most disinterested, has a history.
> (Foucault, 1984: 87)

I want to bring together Woolf's demand that we keep thinking the nature of the 'civilization' in which we find ourselves with Guattari's call for a 'revolution' that will be concerned with the small things; in particular, the domain of sensibility. If, for Woolf writing in 1938, the major threat was global war, then for us today the threat is, as Guattari argues, increasing "ecological disequilibrium" on a planetary scale. Woolf, in response to the threat of a world war, suggests a three-pronged strategy involving women's education, professional life, and 'outsider' political action. Guattari, in response to the threat of a different global catastrophe, suggests a three-pronged strategy involving new forms of subjectivity, new practices of sociality, and new forms of environmental intervention. In effect, I would suggest, both thinkers place their hopes in the human potential for subjective transformation. In this paper, I will focus on one area in which we see this transformability: the historical variability of moral sensibility. What, we may ask, happens to the sentiments of care, responsibility, and love, when their objects are oceans, forests, eco-systems, and even a planet? And what is, or can be, the role of critique in understanding these historical shifts? I will begin, firstly, with a note on the idea of "sensibility" and what role it can play for us today. Second, I will consider Guattari's approach to the transformation of sensibilities, within the context of the project to promote a "re-singularization" of subjectivity. Third, I will take up broader questions about genealogy and critique – within a Nietzscho-Foucauldian framework.

I

It may seem odd, even foolish, to undertake a philosophical discussion of sensibilities. The term may seem hopelessly vague and even a little old-fashioned. In his *Keywords,* Raymond Williams notes that the term sensibility has had a complex, and perhaps prematurely truncated, history in its modern usage (1983: 280-83). The word, he says, "faded from active discussion [c1960], but it is significant that in its actual range...no adequate replacement has been found" (1983: 283). What does that range comprise? At its high point, in early twentieth century criticism, the term was used to comprise two potentially conflicting faculties — thought and feeling, or reason and emotion. It conveyed "a whole activity, a whole way of perceiving and responding, not to be reduced to either 'thought' or 'feeling'" (282). It was in this sense of the term that T.S. Eliot,

writing in 1921, could bemoan what he calls the "dissociation of sensibility" that, in his view, marks a transition in seventeenth century English poetry. Eliot's essay is worth looking at here, not so much for its theory about a seventeenth rupture in English poetry, or for the insight it offers into Eliot's critical mindset, but for the very broad, and yet quite precise, way in which the term sensibility is used.

The essay was originally published in 1921 as a review of an anthology of the English 'metaphysical' poets (Eliot, 1951). In it, Eliot seeks to assist in the rehabilitation of this group of poets, largely by arguing that they represent a high point in English poetry, due to their ability to integrate thought and feeling. As Eliot says, "a thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility". He and his fellow metaphysical poets "possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience". By the end of the seventeenth century, however, thought and feeling could no longer be combined in this way. In Eliot's view, later poets, such as Milton, were incapable of this kind of synthesis; they could of course think, but their thought reflected upon their feeling, rather than being imbricated with it. In contrast, the metaphysical poets embody the highest capacity for integration. Eliot describes this capacity in the following way:

> When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking.

Putting aside, if we can, the inherent elitism of this contrast between poet and ordinary person, we can recognise here a concept of sensibility in which the sensory/emotional and the intellectual/rational are inseparable. But this is a form of sensibility that, according to Eliot, is under constant threat in the modern world. For us, thought and feeling are not only dissociated, they are *supposed to be* separate. In the field of poetry, Eliot suggests that to make up for this one-sidedness would require that we not only look into the "heart", but also into "the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts".

When investigating the transformation in our ecological sensibilities, we might say there is a similar need. The advantage of using the concept of sensibility here is that it compels us to take into consideration more than our reasoned principles, along with their application to practical problems – this, as Guattari points out, has been the inadequate approach of many 'traditional' responses to ecological problems. Thinking in terms of sensibility, in contrast, allows us to see both the nature of the transformation that is required and also to see some of the tools that might make that possible.

II

Guattari draws our attention to the apparatuses (dispositifs) of "the production of subjectivity" (34) and encourages us to give up thinking in terms of "the subject" and instead consider the "components of subjectification" that work more or less independently of each other (36). This gives us a way to begin thinking about transformations in sensibilities. First, we must make a fundamental distinction between the "individual" and "subjectivity". Guattari suggests that the

individual is merely the "terminal", the end point, for processes of subjectification that have their starting points in collective, social, public processes:

Vectors of subjectification do not necessarily pass through the individual, which in reality appears to be something like a 'terminal' for processes that involve human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data-processing machines, etc. Therefore, interiority establishes itself at the crossroads of multiple components, each relatively autonomous in relation to the other, and, if need be, in open conflict. (36)

What this means is that if we wish to investigate the history of, for example, our moral sensibilities, we will need to focus on those extra-individual, exterior processes. A major task for this critical history (aka genealogy), therefore, will be to identify (and evaluate?) the processes that currently, in this civilization, in-form our ecological sensibilities. Guattari suggests "human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data-processing machines", which we would need to update to include the apparatus of Web 2.0, new social media, etc. The question then would be, how and with what effect does this extra- individual apparatus mould, form, and create our newly emerging ecological sensibilities? We could, for example, ask whether the responsibilisation and moralisation of eco-behaviour, considered as components of subjectification, contribute to producing a dull passive subject OR a singular creative subject OR something in between, less extreme?

III

Is it the case that a historical analysis of our (ethical) sensibilities would be, necessarily, *critical?* And, if so, why? To answer these questions fully we would have to detail the relation between the Nietzschean/Foucauldian practice of genealogy and the project of *critique.* For the moment, let's just point to two instances in which this connection is made. In *The Gay Science,* Nietzsche announces the project of a history of moral feelings – "a history of love, of avarice, of envy, of conscience, of piety, of cruelty" (GS, 7). If such a history were written, he says, it would lead to the annihilation of many of our most dearly-held values; and such a destruction would open up a space for a great experimentation. In other words: genealogy of morality => destruction of values => experimentation (or, in Guattari's terms, a "resingularization" of subjectivity).
Foucault, for his part, makes the connection in this way:

> criticism [la *critique]* – understood as analysis of the historical conditions that bear on the creation of links to truth, to rules, and to the self – does not mark out impassable boundaries or describe closed systems; it brings to light transformable singularities. (Foucault, 1997: 201)

In other words, critique – understood as genealogy – brings to light those points at which transformation can be effected. In Guattari's terms:

> The reconquest of a degree of creative autonomy in one particular domain encourages conquests in other domains – the catalyst for a gradual reforging and renewal of humanity's confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level. (69)

Thus, from the most miniscule level, a potential transformation in the molecular domain of

sensibility.

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