



Undergraduate Dissertation coversheet & feedback form

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For completion by student:

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Dissertation title:

Supervisor: Tutor: RH

Word count:

I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism.

Signed:

For completion by the first marker:

Comments:

This essay contains many relevant ideas & concepts. In places certain notions are over-simplified.

(eg. 'cosmopolitan') & there is some need to link these notions more explicitly to the essay Q (see comment in body of essay). The essay is on the reading material set for the module - the main, would benefit from drawing more on the reading on) sustainable development. would help, as would incorporating a more explicit discussion of international & inter-generational justice, utilising the philosophical terminology a little more. But, overall, the essay reveals knowledge

First Marker's Mark: 56% of relevant facts, ideas and

Signature: [Signature]

Date: 21/3/2023

arguments. However, more of the key reading needs to be included to develop the arguments in sufficient depth & clarity

Sak P-M

Does responsibility for action on the climate and biodiversity crisis rest with individuals or with collectives (such as states and corporations), or both?

Introduction

We face increasingly serious problems as a species, and all the most pressing issues have been

created by human endeavours. We have become so skilled and technologically advanced in shaping our environment and bending nature to our will that humans have been having huge impacts on the natural world. Since the dawn of the Holocene, planet earth has enjoyed a period of environmental stability which has allowed for all life to thrive and evolve. No time in the history of the earth has been quite so pleasant as this, and it was likely to last a very long time. The Holocene began at the end of the last ice age roughly 11,700 years ago and thanks to Earth's orbit and celestial position this was unlikely to shift for the foreseeable future, however human activity since the first industrial revolution has caused such major changes to the climate that scholars are calling the era we now inhabit the Anthropocene¹. If we can't make a serious paradigm shift, there's not much point trying to imagine a distant future for ourselves, as we will not be part of it. Human activity has had such a large scale impact on the environmental life support systems which have allowed for this growth, we have chopped down the trees, burnt up inordinate amounts of fossil fuels and pumped the atmosphere with pollutants. The two-fold crises of climate change and biodiversity loss² are the biggest challenges we face as a species. Humans have been the cause of these crises and the forecast for the future is bleak unless we make some mega changes. It is obvious that we need to clean up our mess, and we need to rise to the responsibility and work together to find or create solutions to prevent apocalyptic results, we owe it each other and to future generations, and ultimately all other species of life on earth. The question remains however, whose responsibility is it? Will swapping out my lightbulbs for energy saving ones alone make an impact which will save the world, I think not!

Environmental threats

With rising sea levels, changes to weather patterns, extremely heavy rainfall, and heat waves like the one we had in summer of 2022 it is obvious the effects climate change is bringing about. This imbalance is impacting how our natural ecological systems such as seas, rivers and woodlands function. The damage will affect many things that society relies on such as reservoirs, farmland and delicate ecosystems which support life. Increased nature loss has a snowball effect and more destabilisation will follow, it's a vicious cycle. How we manage the land, freshwater and seas here in the UK evidently needs to change, and we need to review how we measure and value nature because the status quo has led us to disaster. It's not just climate change which we should concern ourselves with; the biodiversity in the UK is suffering under increasing pressures caused by urbanization, agricultural pollution, hydrological damage, the introduction of invasive non-native species and poor habitat management leading to major losses and fragmentation of key habitats. Even the soil is being destroyed and polluted by urban development, all of which has contributed to a massive decline in wildlife. Many native species are now threatened with extinction. When was the last time you saw a hedgehog?

Planning for the future

The UK population will continue to increase year on year. Populations are squeezed into urban areas, small nuclear family households put more pressure on the production and consumption of

¹ Lewis, Simon L., and Mark A. Maslin. "Defining the anthropocene." *Nature* 519.7542 (2015): 171-180.
² Cardinale, Bradley J., et al. "Biodiversity loss and its impact on humanity." *Nature* 486.7401 (2012): 59-67.

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resources used to build new homes, but these are often constructed in ways which will not be suitable for the changes to come. Modern housing is poorly insulated and ill equipped to shelter us from extremes in temperature for instance.

Biodiversity should be an integral part of planning any new developments. Combating climate change and nature loss will require us to adapt the way in which we build our homes, public schools and business and retail centres. If we incorporate sustainably to planning more land could allow for more biodiversity and more resilience, this would have positive climate benefits. Climate change and the biodiversity crisis are interconnected, we should work towards supporting the assets found in nature and support recovery by eliminating the pressures they face. Doing so would doubtless aid in combating climate change, if we can help the natural world to thrive so too shall humanity thrive.

The responsibility of individuals

We are probably all familiar with the sort of rhetoric espoused by corporate representatives and politicians saying that the best way to tackle these issues is by citizens doing their recycling, turning down their heating, upgrading to a smart energy meter or avoiding single use plastics.³ Whilst these solutions offer a sense of involvement and can make a small difference, which if multiplied would make a difference of sorts, it doesn't tackle the problem at the root but instead defers responsibility away from the state, organisation or corporation and saddles the consumer with the responsibility and a possible sense of guilt and hopelessness. This collective hopelessness is a serious problem in and of itself. We live in an age of widely spread and cynicism and nihilism, to the point where it is one of the stereotypes of my generation.

If we had a greater sense of social responsibility as humans, then we would be more likely to commit to making positive changes which would impact all, not just the individual. Humans are a very socially reliant species, we (humans) are cooperative by nature and have organised to work together in a way that no other complex life on Earth can compare to.

Individuals form groups, larger than the sum of their parts.

Most change begins with individuals making a stand, we talk and share ideas, grouping together to try to be heard, as the collective often outweighs the individual. But they cannot affect decent change quickly, this is in part due to more moving parts. Simply put, forming a group is easy enough but effectively organising to bring a task to completion requires cooperation and compromise. Groups can put pressure on the government to effect change, and all major social changes have been brought about through groups of like-minded people coming together. This might take the form of a social movement like protests, unions, and political parties, lobbying groups and think tanks. Groups who want to effect change can focus on gathering data to create evidence on which to pressure government to change and attempt to mobilise public opinion. Bringing hard facts to the table is crucial but often ignored or made light of in the realms of public debate from parliament to social media.

Individuals who lead organisations or businesses can impact both positive and negative change. It would seem that the people who are in this position should adhere to the adage 'with great power, comes great responsibility'. Unfortunately, but also some would argue, rather deliberately, this kind of social, economic and environmental consciousness is poorly rewarded and conversely there is no

³ Big oil coined 'carbon footprints' to blame us for their greed. Keep them on the hook | Rebecca Solnit (2021) The Guardian. Guardian News and Media. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/23/big-oil-coined-carbon-footprints-to-blame-us-for-their-greed-keep-them-on-the-hook> (Accessed: March 19, 2023).

limit to the rewards which can be reaped through self-interest. Some business leaders are starting to realise the importance of public image, and with increasing awareness of the afore mentioned issues, companies are beginning to make changes, although often the ideals represented by big businesses are simply a smokescreen for their real interests. Greenwashing is a term used to describe the type of clever propaganda which misleads customers/consumers to feel more comfortable buying or using products from these companies. Labels and certificates have become an increasingly popular means of virtue signalling. When accredited by independent oversight committees these labels and certificates can help to distinguish between ethical and less ethical products but sadly many are misleading and carry little validity.

Responsibility and power of corporations/states

States need to commit to change for it to happen long-term. There have been commitments made by groups of states, such as the Paris Agreement, in which nations set targets to cut their carbon emissions. Countries have varying action plans based on a multitude of factors such as development and historic contributions to climate change. While these agreements do constitute some level of action on a state level, the commitments made are unlikely to be sufficient to prevent runaway climate change and biodiversity loss.

States need to press corporations to effect change as states alone cannot make it happen within the free market. States play a key role in effecting change as they hold power over corporations, whereas most individuals rarely do. Government rules need to be in place to impact on corporations, and individuals need to begin to accept and commit to change.

We all have individual responsibility but those with vested power ought to be held accountable and recognise that the power they have increases their social responsibility. Mega rich billionaires are able to influence change on a global scale, why should they have the right to use their wealth to affect changes that benefit only them or even to choose philanthropic endeavours which are often a way to wash their hands of the bad things they have done and to avoid taxation. Individuals with mega wealth are able to utilise resources to change public opinion and inform consent.

B corps and types of company structures

B-Corporations are a form of private certification⁴ created for for-profit companies rating their social and environmental commitments. This certification is a third-party accreditation requiring companies to meet social sustainability and environmental performance standards, providing accountability standards, businesses must be transparent and publish the score they receive from the assessment. This is one example of a move to hold large scale corporations to account in terms of their stated business practices, ideals and philosophies and they are audited to investigate into their business practices. This is a move in the right direction although for-profit companies are still chasing growth in profits year on year which is an inherently unsustainable model but sadly this is the best approach so far. Other notable business structures include not for profit and community interest companies both of which are best suited to meet the needs of local communities, employees and environmental interests and are less corruptible and value more than just their profit margin.



Could you bring the
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sustainable development
we did (B to module)

⁴ The UK B corporation movement (no date) The UK B Corporation Movement. Available at: <https://bcorporation.uk/> (Accessed: March 19, 2023).

Social Models

Anarchist philosophy provide an interesting perspective, providing an alternative to the dominant ideologies of today such as neoliberalism or Keynesianism (government spending to help the bottom line of the state). Neoliberalism has ripped away the social and environmental safety net and further concentrated inequality and resources into the hands of private individuals. Neoliberalism, globalism and the concept of the free market are all the same thing really, however these three concepts come together to support neo-colonialism. Anarchism is the opposite to hierarchical structures which cement the inequalities of this life. Anarcho-syndicalists recognise the need for minimal necessary structures to support social reproduction, but place importance on mutual aid as opposed to the free market as a way of meeting human need.

Different cultural norms or approaches perhaps alter where the responsibility lies and what we consider valuable. In brief there are three types of societies which exemplify contrasting values. These are;

anarchist- endless time and space all interconnected and everything has agency and deserves respect
communist- respect is historically achieved through ancestors and is the purpose for doing what needs to be done for all rather than just for personal gain.

cosmopolitan- based on the ego doing what is needed for personal success and survival. Not good at collective action, embedded by governments.

The relationship between power and responsibility.

"With great power comes great responsibility." This quote from Voltaire, made even more famous by Spiderman, comes to mind. In this day and age, abuses of power are constantly in the news and on social media, from politicians, footballers and business executives. Whether obvious or covert, any abuse of power is troubling and is dangerous when coupled with a lack of accountability. Situations of misuse of power can have detrimental effects on either an individual's reputation and that of the organization they represent and will also undermine the other members, employees or the group objective as a result. Therefore, it's critical that those in positions of power keep themselves in check or have extra layers of accountability built into the power structure. Power should be used wisely and the powerful should be mindful of their influence. Unfortunately, another quote comes to mind from a letter to an Anglican bishop in 1887 written by Lord Acton an English Catholic historian, politician, and writer who famously wrote, "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely"⁶

Corporations and states can be blamed much more easily than any individual. Corporate policies and the government legislation are a much better target when apportioning blame for the destruction of the environment and biodiversity. The larger or more powerful the organisation the more likely it is that they have impacted on the world around them. Of course, they are comprised of individuals, but those individuals cannot be held accountable in the same way as we would hold them accountable for other actions or choices, because they are under the umbrella of their organisation

⁵ Seland, Darryl. "WITH GREAT... COMES GREAT..." *Quality*, vol. 57, no. 4, Apr. 2018, p. 6. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A537054951/AONE?u=anon~5ed7c6c3&sid=googleScholar&id=f8f65bd3. Accessed 19 Mar. 2023.

⁶ Lord Acton 1834-1902 British historian: letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 3 April 1887.

Reverend: "are all connected, or part of the same..."

Investigative

Relate to essay & more explicitly

Different meanings are relevant here

and are subject to the aims and objectives of the larger collective, which in the case of most corporations is ultimately the profit motive.

Conclusion

The ultimate question is, is it more about individuals making ethical choices consistently despite the small impacts these have on minimising climate change and biodiversity loss, or about corporations and states being made to pay the economic and social price for their polluting and destructive industries? Individuals certainly ought to be equipped to make ethical decisions, an educated and informed public will be better able to engage with the problems faced by that society. Any organisations, whether corporations, states or social movements are comprised of many individuals but whether or not those individuals have any say in the decisions and practices of the organisations depends on the structure of the organisation. Corporations usually have narrow interests and work for the profit of their investors, not the good of humanity at large. In an ideal world, individuals can form groups, groups can take action to put pressure on states and states can exercise their power over corporations. However this is subject to failure due to the challenges of effective grassroots organising, the refusal of governments to pay attention to the demands of the public, and due to corrupt relationships between government and industry.

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