From the Ethics of Energy to the Energy of Ethics

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LAIS Research Award Lecture
November 28, 2012
De vita academica mea

- Honored and embarrassed
  - In the presence of so many of you, my work seems superficial and maybe a bit pretentious
- Never had a plan for my life
  - Certainly did not expect to become an academic
- Modestly uneasy with what I have become
  - Yet deeply grateful for being paid to teach and think and read and write
Felt kinship with California artist John Baldessari

“I used to wake up sometimes in a sweat, and tell myself I was just making trinkets for rich people.”

New Yorker (Oct. 18, 2010), p.49.

“Brain/Cloud,” 2009
The brain/cloud of Interdisciplinarity

- Philosophy and (not of) technology
- Specialist in the general

Atmosphere at Pangea 300 million YBP

Attempting to go over the railing at Zhangjiajie
Method (such as it is): Historico-Philosophical Reflection
From the Ethics of Energy
To the Energy of Ethics

Outline: Historico-philosophical background →
Type I vs Type II energy ethics →
Thinking the energy of ethics
1. Background: Energy Ethics texts (selective)

Ubbelohde (1907-1988)
Pro-Energy Ethics Theorist

- Prof. Chemical Engineering (thermodynamics), Imperial College
- Concept of “energy slaves” (= inanimate prime movers)
- The foundation of “Tektopia”: “Tektopias are theoretical constructions of ideal states, based on a large proportion of inanimate energy slaves” (p. 86).
Ivan Illich (1926-2002)  
Anti-Energy Ethics Theorist

- Original ethical response to the 1970s energy crisis with criticism of increased energy production and use.

- “[U]nder some circumstances, a technology incorporates the values of the society for which it was invented to such a degree that these values become dominant in every society which applies that technology…. High-energy technology, at least as applied to traffic, provides a clear example” (Toward a History of Needs, 1978, p. 110).
Hessel, MacLean, Smil, Latouche

• Dieter Hessel = Christian social ethics extension of the kind of discourse introduced by Illich
• Douglas MacLean = academic ethics extension of the kind of discourse introduced by Illich (first Energy Ethics course)
• Vaclav Smil = Ubbelohde recidivus (with qualifications)
• Serge Latouche = Illich recidivus
2. Energy Ethics: Type I versus Type II

- **Type I Energy Ethics:** Energy is an unqualified good, the production and use of which should be increased whenever possible.

- **Type II Energy Ethics:** Energy is at best a qualified good, the production and use of which should be subordinated to other goods.
“The Most Important Plot for the 21st Century” according to Type I energy moralists (such as Barry Smitherman, TX Public Utility Commission, 2007)

Type I: Pro-Energy Ethics

- Energy = unqualified good / necessary for life
- Energy production expands human power / raises quality of life (utilitarian)
- Increasing energy use by humans is natural (teleological ethics / virtue ethics)
- Human beings are obligated to increase energy availability (deontology)
- History = increasing energy production + use
- Energy is beautiful
GDP-Electric Energy Consumption Correlations
(a slightly more ambiguous energy morality plot)

Source: CIA World Factbook, 2007
Alternative graph pointing toward Type II energy ethics
Other suggestive data

- In Europe and North America today, per capita energy consumption is ~4x100 years ago.
- In the developed world, per capita U.S. consumption is >2x that of the Danes, Spanish, or French.
- Per capita Americans consume >8x the energy of East Indians.

Questions

- Is U.S. quality of life double that of Danes, Spaniards, or French? Is it reasonable for fair for Americans to consume more than eight times the average East Indian?
Type II: Questioning-Energy Ethics

- Energy = qualified good / necessary only up to a point
- Beyond some point, increasing energy production + use becomes counterproductive / reduce quality of life (utilitarian)
- Stabilized or balanced energy use by humans is natural (teleological ethics / virtue ethics)
- Human beings are obligated to limit energy availability (deontology)
- History ≠ increasing energy production + use
- Energy is often ugly
Energy Ethics: Type I vs Type II

In the Presence of a Pro-energy Worldview

- **Type I**: Accepts this worldview as a true or valid identification of the end, and undertakes only ethical assessments of the productive means.

- **Type II**: Questions this worldview as a true or valid identification of the end, and considers alternative understandings of energy in relation to the good.
Energy Ethics: Type I

*Type I* criticism leaves pro-energy worldview in place but examines its effective pursuit and consistency with other values.

- Private vs public energy production: Cheap energy (individualist social ontology), energy security, energy justice
- Regulate explosive energy use (e.g., warfare)
- Consider harms to health (risks private and public)
- Degradations of natural environment: Theories of sustainability
  - Green energy
  - Energy conservation
  - Alternative energy
Energy Ethics: Type II

*Type II* criticism tries to raise basic questions about the pro-energy worldview.

- Energy production + use = subordinate or limited good (perhaps not always good at all)
- Argues the goodness of lifeworld circumscriptions on energy production + use: Rethinking social ontologies and the meaning of energy security, energy justice, risk, health, sustainability, and more
- What is energy, anyway?
Ontological Mystery of Energy

“It is important to realize that in physics today, we have no knowledge of what energy is…. [T]here are formulas for calculating some numerical quantity…. [But this] is … abstract [and] does not tell us the mechanisms or the reasons for the various formulas.”

Type II Speculations: Truly Alternative Energies

Aristotelian ἐνέργεια

Newtonian “energy”

Chinese qi (气) vs neng yuan (能源)

In Chinese traditional medicine, qi references human vitality. By contrast, neng yuan is energy available for human use.
Thinking Ethics as Energy

Thinking about what is good can create its own distinctive energy. Socrates: The unexamined life is not worth living for humans.”
Type II Energy Ethics Ultimate Question: Can it be more than a brain cloud?
I wandered lonely as a cloud

That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,...

The waves beside them danced;
but they...

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude...

That subtle energy abounds amid the skies
when thinking on the good is no surprise.