

The Children of Earth. Archaic Principles for Environmental Ethics?

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The children of Earth: this is a poetically sounding title. The idea is simple. I want to stir up some feelings by referring to the fact that we human beings have sprung from the biological evolution, that we are thus the children of Mother Earth, and that presently we are on a course which may very well kill our mother, at least as we have known her, and, of course, ourselves as well. It is not in good taste to kill one's mother, nor is it in good taste to kill oneself. As a matter of fact it is immoral. If we look back we find that our archaic ancestors largely lived in an ecologically sensible way. Their lifeworld had a foundation of implicit morality. Metaphorically speaking the archaic people represent the childhood stage of the development of human societies. The question is: How have we lost our childhood, has our growing up gone wrong, what kind of adults have we become? Hence we have here a link to the subtitle: Can archaic principles contribute something to the building of environmental ethics, and is it possible to reactivate some of these principles in our present-day (Western) society?

In an attempt at tentatively answering this question let us employ an evolutionary perspective, described symbolically by (Fig.1) which shows circles within circles. The outermost circle, I call it the geospheric circle, represents the Earth before the advent of life. The second circle, the biospheric circle, stands for life in all forms before the advent of humans. After the human revolution we have the development of human societies and cultures. This is symbolized by the three inner circles which point to the three commonly distinguished stages of cultural evolution: First, we have the archaic stage of small groups with their structures of kinship and other direct social ties. Second, the emergence of political structures out of the neolithic revolution leads to the development of hierarchically organized societies with spatially extended territories. And finally, as a product of the industrial revolution, we witness the advent of economic structures which today tend to mesh all humanity into one large global system.

Without going further into detail here (for a more thorough discussion of the meaning of Fig.1 see Steiner 1992) let us note that each circle represents a duality which is typical for what one may call a recursive system: The bottom marks the levels of elements or parts, the top the level of the whole, which consists of a

network of structures or rules. The latter enable sensible interactions between the elements, and the elements, by engaging in these interactions keep the associated structures alive, which makes further interactions possible, etc. These recursive systems are related to each other in a structural way (shown by the simple lines at the top) and they influence each other in a causal fashion (indicated by the arrowed lines at the bottom).

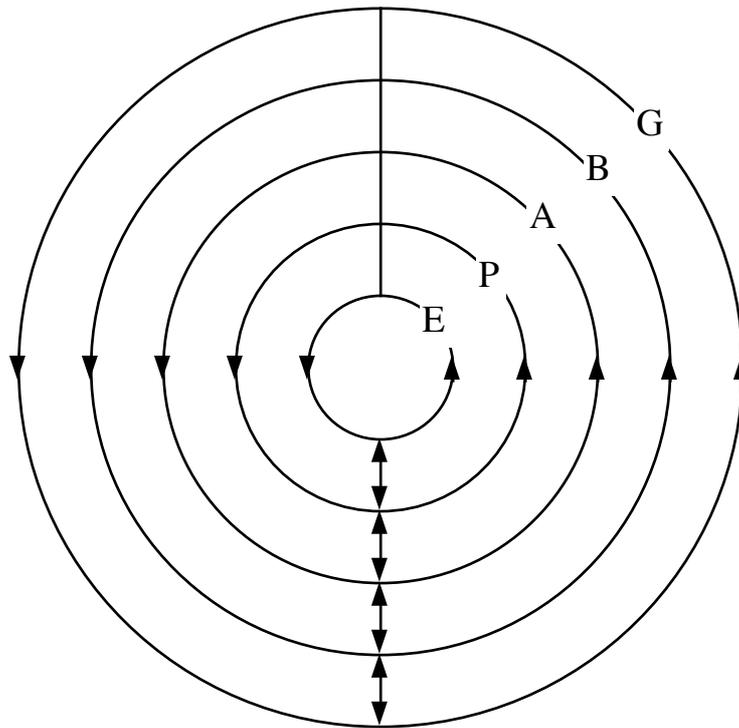


Fig. 1: A symbolic representation of evolution: recursive systems embedded within each other. G = geospheric system, B = biospheric system, A = archaic system, P = political system, E = economic system

Our present world comprises all five circles. A reality symbolized by an inner circle has come into existence because it is something new and, consequently, is emancipated to some extent from what existed before. On the other hand, to remain sustainable, a new system must remain based on and embedded within what existed before. Obviously, destruction of the base involves self-destruction. We are back to the mother and the children. But this is the course that cultural evolution seems to be taking at present. The systems represented by the inner circles have become too much emancipated. In particular, as we know, the economic system (the innermost circle), has dispatched itself on a journey involving a constantly accelerating self-dynamic, a real maelstrom, which surely spells disaster if it cannot be stopped in time. Hopefully, a growing awareness of an impending catastrophe will open our eyes to the existence of the limits imposed on us and to

the necessity of a renewed anchoring of our doings in our cultural past and our biological roots. As Stephen Schneider and Lynn Morton put it in their book *The Primordial Bond*: “We are certainly attempting to detach ourselves from Nature, but we are no more able to achieve that goal fully than were previous civilizations. The continuing paradox is that we are both detaching from and becoming more ‘embedded’ in Nature” (Schneider and Morton 1981).

How has this development leading up to the present mess been possible? A factor of overriding importance would seem to be a gradual decline of morality in the course of cultural evolution. With archaic societies a religiously motivated morality is implicit and unquestioned. In political societies philosophy starts to ask questions and discuss ethical problems in explicit terms, in a way which allows a deduction of more detailed moral statements from more general, overall and fundamental principles. In our economic society, comprising the positive feedback trinity of science, technology and economy, morality has, in theory at least, become something inductive, to be established after the fact, namely based on the experience of human choices. It is a situation which Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, in their book *Meaning*, call one of “moral inversion”. (Polanyi and Prosch 1975).

Interpreted differently one might say that the moral dimension is lacking completely, and this is the stance taken by the political scientist Amitai Etzioni in his book *The Moral Dimension*. Let us have a look at how he diagnoses the present situation. He identifies the neoclassical paradigm as not only representing the still dominant thinking in economics, but also as having a widespread influence in such disciplines as political science, psychology, sociology and anthropology. The neoclassical view of humans is one that sees them as self-centered and pleasure-seeking beings, as free-floating individuals not dependent on any socio-cultural bonds, as persons that are capable of rationally selecting the best means for a particular goal by themselves, the goal being one of utility maximization. That this view is one-dimensional Etzioni shows with a quotation from a typical economics textbook: “Utility is simply whatever makes the commodity desired. ... Bourbon, dope, Bibles and opera all possess utility in varying degrees” (Etzioni 1988).

The neoclassical economic theory in itself is a consistent logical system. The problem with it, however, is that it is far removed from reality. Indeed, Etzioni discusses at length how neoclassical economists have struggled with the problem posed by empirical evidence that the real behaviour of human beings may differ drastically from that predicted by theory, that in fact they may very well act altruistically. The solution proposed by these economists is an extension of the notion of utility to include acts of help and cooperation as undertakings giving satisfaction to the ones helping and cooperating. One economist, puzzled by the fact that there are people who give donations to the church, is reported as having invented the concept of “afterlife consumption” (Etzioni 1988). Obviously this is complete humbug. Etzioni shows that one should consider at least two basic dimensions of human motivation: pleasure and morality. The two cannot be reduced to one another; in fact, they may be in conflict with one another. When

morally motivated, an individual does something not because it gives pleasure, but because it seems “right” to do it. It is obvious then that theory and fact in economics do not coincide. But this does not mean that one can dismiss economic theory as harmless. Etzioni points to the dis-educational effects of neoclassical teaching to which each year millions of high school and college students are exposed, and he says: “One wonders what is the effect on the attitude of potential parents to children, if they are systematically taught to think about their offspring as a trade-off to other ‘goods’, such as cars?” (Etzioni 1988).

The philosopher Alasdair Macintyre, in his book *After Virtue*, describes the present time as one in which the moral discourse is in great disorder. The enlightenment, as a process which transformed the holistic worldview dominant in the political societies of antiquity and of the middle ages into the modern atomistic worldview, had on the one hand the positive effect of bringing about a liberation from the prisons of church dogmas, but, on the other hand, the negative aspect of dissolving Aristotelian ethics which thus far had been providing a logically consistent scheme. What is this scheme? It comprises three elements, each of which requires a reference to the other two, if its status and function are to be intelligible. They are: a concept of “humans-as-they-happen-to-be”, a concept of “humans-as-they-could-be-if-they-realized-their-essential-nature” (Macintyre 1985), and a concept of ethics which tells human beings how to get from the first state to the second. The scheme then involves a notion of human self-fulfilment, a goal to be reached, a *telos* which is inherent in the essence of humans. Only on such a basis is it at all possible to develop a practical philosophy. Now the predicament of the philosophers of the enlightenment, according to Macintyre, was that they had to base their argumentation on a different understanding of the powers of human reason; it was said that any statements about the essential human nature, as a potential to be realized, were entirely beyond the reach of this reason. Consequently, the philosophers were left with the two remaining elements of the scheme, the concept of untutored humans and a collection of traditional moral ideas. But these were incongruent with each other, and, as a result, the project of a rational derivation of ethics in a post-Aristotelian fashion was doomed to failure right from the start.

Aristotelian ethics was an undertaking which aimed at making moral principles explicit by means of a rational discourse involving some functional concept of human beings. However, as Macintyre points out, this concept is far older than Aristotle; it has its roots in the lifeworld of real human societies of the past, in which moral principles had an implicit status. This then brings us back to the people we are particularly interested in, the archaic people. How could any kind of morality develop in an implicit way? To give an answer, I am making use of some notions of David Steindl-Rast, who represents the personal union of a Benedictine monk and a Zen Buddhist. These ideas were expressed by him in a recent workshop on *Science and Religion* which I had the opportunity to attend. Humans are animals that have religion, he says. But institutionalized religion is secondary, first comes the religious feeling, the religious experience. What is this? Well, it is some kind of feeling of being overwhelmed. It could be an experience of the type Saint Augustine once had: the beauty of such things as blossoms and leaves gave

him the conviction that they are a proof for the existence of a divine being (Bateson 1979). Or it could be simply a feeling of: “This is it!”, a feeling that the world is One, an undivided wholeness, a sense of belonging to it, being part of it, a feeling of togetherness, of being not alone. It is what in religious circles is called a mystical experience, or what in psychological quarters may be discussed as a “peak experience”. It is a mental state which belongs to a primeval kind of human experience of reality and, therefore, is presumably common in an archaic society. This is not supposed to mean that these people were in a constant state of mystical union with their environment, but that the import of religious experience pervaded their consciousness to such an extent that they tried to actively evoke it by engaging in rituals regularly, which would provide them with an identification with the bigger world around them. “Identification” is an expression used by the ecophilosopher Arne Naess in his book *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, and can perhaps be described as a feeling of being supported by this world and, at the same time, of being able to help to support this world in return. Such an identification makes the distinction between facts and values vanish and thus leads to a kind of implicit morality. As we know, the belief that facts and values must and can be strictly separated at all times is one of the great “sacred cows” of our civilization and is surely one of the factors responsible for its destructiveness.

Are we, in this day and age, still capable of experiencing such genuine religious feelings? We certainly are. We all will remember one or the other occasion on which we became totally overwhelmed. Perhaps we were out on a nature trail, or we were sharing something in an intimate fashion with other people. We ought to think about how the settings of our lives should look so that such experiences could occur more frequently, and not just in our spare and vacation time, but in our normal daily lives. However, we should also remember that, of course, a new morality in a modern society like ours cannot be developed solely on the basis of personal experiences of the kind mentioned, even if they result in collectively shared values. The point is that they just provide the more unconscious parts of our psyche with implicit knowledge about our world. This is an eminently important basis, but not sufficient. On top of it we also need a complement provided by what some authors call a communicative rationality, which serves to determine explicitly stated goals and values through a conscious dialogue with others. Such a combination, in which both normative/affective factors and logical-empirical considerations can play their proper role, should replace, in theory and practice, the one-sided instrumental rationality and the radical individualism suggested by the neoclassical paradigm mentioned earlier. In this sense Etzioni proposes his “I and We” paradigm: It sees individuals as being able to act rationally to a limited extent on their own, thereby advancing their “I”, but also their ability to do so as being deeply affected by how well they are established within a sound community they can perceive as theirs, as a “We”, and sustained by a firm moral and emotive personal underpinning. It shows a way of bringing economics back into the political system, and politics back into the society at large, a way, as in the figure, to re-embed the inner circles within the outer circles and thus avoid the explosion.

To conclude, let us turn back to the children. I believe that children, and I mean

now real, not metaphorical children, are better than adults at most of what is required, that is, getting back to a closer relationship with nature, leaving room for the possibility of religious experience, and being open in talking with others. It so happens that the anthropologist Ashley Montagu, in his book with the paradoxical title *Growing Young*, develops the thesis that humans are members of a species which retains some childlike drives through to adult life, drives resulting in, for example, love, curiosity, wonder, playfulness, learning, creativity, humour, honesty, friendship, etc. Would Aristotle have agreed with this interpretation of the real essence of human beings? We can only guess. Montagu at any rate thinks that we do not or, because society tends to regard childlike characteristics as childish and hence suppresses them, cannot develop our real potentiality. He argues that we should grow as children and not become the kind of adults we are supposed to become now. The goal of life should be “to die young, but as late as possible”. Perhaps, if we can achieve that, all hope is not lost.

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