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Beyond a Materialist Environmentalism

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In this paper I will take the approach that the way we understand the world, at the deepest level, determines how we live in the world. The environmental crisis is accordingly, from this point of view, a crisis of metaphysics, and it calls for a revision of the metaphysical premises of our civilization. This approach has been developed in the West in certain ecophilosophies, notably deep ecology. The new metaphysical premise that I propose in this paper however owes much to Chinese thought, specifically Taoism. I have developed arguments for this premise in two recent books, *For Love of Matter* and *Reinhabiting Reality*. I shall here set out some of the claims of these books, and then explain how these claims entail that we adopt, as a basic existential modality, a way of being in the world that transforms every aspect of our lives, not just our relation to the environment.¹

1.

In *For Love of Matter* I argue that the materialist metaphysic that forms the premise of modern civilization needs to be replaced not merely with a relational (ecological) metaphysic – one that posits the interconnectedness of everything with everything else – but with a *panpsychist* one. Panpsychism is understood as a metaphysic that ascribes mentality, in some enlarged sense, not merely to selected particulars – whether these be persons, animals, plants or whatever – but to world itself, under its aspect as a unity: we are invited to see the world as a subject in its own right with ends and meanings and communicative capacities of its own and an inclination to communicate with individuals, its own finite emanations. Wherever this communicative engagement occurs, it is manifest in a *poetic order* – an order of poetic revelation - that can unfold alongside the causal order; this poetic order, or order of meaning, goes beyond the causal order but in no way violates it. The world is thus a kind of “spirit thing”, a One that can communicate with the Many – the “Ten Thousand Things” - that are its own finite modes.

When world is apprehended in this way our basic existential modalities will have to be revised. It will no longer be appropriate for us to seek, primarily, to *know* the world, in the traditional scientific sense, but we will rather seek to *encounter* it, to elicit its response to us. Nor will it be appropriate for us to *take charge* of a world

¹ See Freya Mathews, *For Love of Matter: a Contemporary Panpsychism*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 2003; and *Reinhabiting Reality: towards a Recovery of Culture*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 2004.

which is understood to have ends and meanings of its own; rather we should *let it be* – we should allow it to unfold in its own way.

At the ideal limit this principle of letting-be implies that we should gather our food from the wild and make our shelters and garments from materials at hand in such a way that these activities feed back into and sustain the natural cycles that produce our livelihood. But what could letting-be mean in contemporary societies, in which such foraging practices have long since become impracticable?

It is true that in contemporary societies we can no longer just pluck food from the forests or run it to ground in ways that directly contribute to the self-realisation of ecosystems. Some kind of *proactivity* on our part is generally going to be necessary if we are to meet our needs. But proactivity need not take the form of recutting the cloth of our world to suit ourselves. It need not mean manipulating and controlling that world, instrumentalising it and imposing our own designs on it. Rather, the kind of action that we cultivate, in the service of our needs, can follow lines of *synergy* rather than intervention or control or the imposition of self on other. By this I mean that we can learn to identify the patterns of energetic flow already at play in the world for the purpose of then “hitching a ride” with them. Instead of cutting across these flows in order to arrive at premeditated ends of our own, we need, in the first place, to select our ends partly in response to what is possible in the world as it is, the world as it is already unfolding, and, in the second place, to make use of existing patterns of energetic flow in order to arrive at these ends.

We shall find that much of our day-to-day praxis, at both personal and social levels, can be re-orchestrated along synergistic rather than impose-and-control lines. Rather than setting ourselves hard-to-achieve goals or harbouring exotic desires, then turning our world upside down to meet them, we can, at the personal level, work *with* the grain of the given instead of *against* it. In the words of an old song, “if you can’t be with the one you love, then love the one you’re with”, or, more accurately, instead of ransacking the world to find the one who matches your dreams, adapt your dreams creatively to the one who is already at hand.

To operate in the synergistic mode requires flexibility, detachment from fixed ideas and overdetermined goals, and an eye for opportunities if and as they present. It might not get you to where you thought you wanted to be, but it *will* get you to a place that will be appropriate when you arrive there.

2.

The praxis of societies as well as individuals can follow synergistic rather than impose-and-control lines. If economics is defined in terms of the way *energy*

must be utilized and organized in order that human needs be satisfied², and if the world itself is understood in energetic terms, then it is through its economics that a society will demonstrate its basic relation to the world. In other words, the metaphysical commitments of a given society will be evident in its economics. The materialist societies of the modern West extract nonhuman energies and deploy them with little regard for non-instrumental meanings or communicative potentials that might inhere in them. True, such societies have latterly begun to think about *conserving* energy, for the sake of human posterity or the long-term viability of the human environment. But from a panpsychist point of view it is not enough merely to conserve energy, unilaterally extracting and transforming it here and storing it there. One has to allow planetary energies to follow their own contours of flow, contours which reveal local and possibly global aspects of a larger world-purpose. In due course one conjoins one's own energies with these flows in order to create new patterns which satisfy one's material needs in ways that also contribute to the further unfolding of this larger purpose.

Under the rubric of *sustainability* Western societies are indeed starting to explore an 'economy of energy' that is consistent with the integrity of the planetary processes that provide the energy; we are, for example, beginning to use wind power and solar power rather than dynamiting landscapes and degrading the atmosphere in pursuit of fossil fuels.

However, sustainability understood in this contemporary sense is still basically materialist. It works physically with the grain of the given but eschews creative engagement with it. In order to count as fully synergistic, in the panpsychist sense of synergy, the praxis of sustainability needs to incorporate the *poetics* of communicative engagement. Sources of energy – sun, wind, tides and so on – need to be mythed, storied, personified for the purposes of invocation; sources of sustenance – plants and animals – need to be sung and thanked. The transactions with the world whereby we ensure our own self-maintenance need at the same time to be invitations to conversation, to poetic collaboration. In other words, praxis is always a matter of poetics as well as pragmatics: the poetics expand our pragmatic imagination while the pragmatics offer endless opportunities for poetics. Praxis is in this sense the very terrain of culture.

A panpsychist culture makes no sharp divide between the living and the non-living, the natural and the artificial or artefactual. As a psychophysical field of ever-changing, inter-flowing configurations, reality carries rocks, apartment blocks and factories along with forests and arid shrublands into the patterns of its unfolding. We synergise with this psychically activated world not by insisting on ecology after the event - demolishing industrial developments to restore lost

² Peter Kropotkin ventured to suggest this more than a century ago, though his definition has been ignored by the majority of subsequent economists. See Peter Kropotkin, *Fields Factories and Workshops Tomorrow*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1974, p.17

woodlands, for instance. To raze and rearrange things according to our own designs – even our ecological designs – is just to perpetuate the modernist cycle of domination-and-control. To break this cycle, and so enable the world in time to recover its own course, we need only acquiesce in the given, at least to the degree necessary to enable the larger world-purpose to re-form and re-emerge. When the contours of that larger unfolding are clear, we can re-align with it, allowing *its* purposes and poetics to direct ours, while at the same time seeking to expand *its* possibilities with our own.

3.

The scope of synergy then as an existential modality is cosmological rather than merely ecological. It encourages us to address ourselves to matter *per se* rather than merely to living systems. Its outcomes are accordingly in the shorter term not coextensive with those of ecologism, but in the longer term synergy ensures that mutualistic modalities will be reliably wired into us as our basic way of being in the world. Synergy as a mode of agency is, I believe, profoundly Taoist; it is basically *wu wei*, that way of being that allows the world to “do the doing”. That is to say, it is the modality of an agent who allows the world to follow the energetic patterns of flow intrinsic to it but who at the same time identifies and skilfully harnesses those flows to arrive at his own ends. These are not the abstractly premeditated ends of one who seeks to remodel the world to his own design but rather the fulfilments that result from joining one’s energies to the energies already, on any given occasion, at play in the world.

As a basic modality – an existential modality – synergy in fact recapitulates the underlying principle of creation itself, a principle which was, in both early European and Chinese cultures, represented as a principle of *fertility*. For in joining together two or more existing patterns of energy to create a new pattern, synergy does indeed allow for the emergence of new form in the world, but this is new form which, like the offspring of two parents, carries within it the story of the old, the story of those from whom the new has arisen. In this sense, the new that springs from synergistic interactions is a new which in no way rests on a repudiation or destruction of the old. As an existential modality then, synergy, like its precursor, fertility, ensures that the world continues to hold together as a unity through change.

Modernity – the condition that originated in western Europe in the 17th century as a result of the scientific revolution – is essentially a modality of change. Modern civilization justifies itself in terms of its ability to change the world, to improve it, to bring about progress. This is its appeal, its seductiveness: it promises to abolish poverty, disease, hunger, all kinds of disadvantage. It does so by destroying the old, by replacing that which already exists with a rationally and abstractly conceived new. It is plain to see, however, that such a regime of continual replacement leads to a kind of generalized falling apart. People’s standard of living may indeed increase, but around them their environment unravels: the

fabric of community and nature ceases to cohere. This is clearly regrettable, but what is the alternative? If we forego modernization, aren't we foregoing change itself, resigning ourselves to stasis – and hence to poverty, disease, hunger, and the rest? No! This is the false dichotomy that proponents of modernization rely upon. There *is* another way. It is to find a mode of agency which indeed enables us to change society but in a manner consistent with the continued cohering of our world. Synergy – the creative principle at the heart of *wu wei* - is such a mode of agency.