

# Anthropocentrism

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“Anthropocentrism” means human chauvinism. Similar to sexism, but substitute “human race” for “man” and “all other species” for “woman.” Human chauvinism, the idea that humans are the crown of creation, the source of all value, the measure of all things, is deeply embedded in our culture and consciousness.

“And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moveth on the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hands they are delivered.”<sup>1</sup>

When humans investigate and see through their layers of anthropocentric self-cherishing, a most profound change in consciousness begins to take place. Alienation subsides. The human is no longer an outside, apart. Your humanness is then recognized as being merely the most recent stage of your existence, and as you stop identifying exclusively with this chapter, you start to get in touch with yourself as mammal, as vertebrate, as a species only recently emerged from the rainforest. As the fog of amnesia disperses, there is a transformation in your relationship to other species, and in your commitment to them.

What is described here should not be seen as merely intellectual. The intellect is one entry point to the process outlined, and the easiest one to communicate. For some people, however, this change of perspective follows from actions on behalf of Mother Earth.

“I am protecting the rainforest” develops into “I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking.”

What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature. That is, the change is a spiritual one, thinking like a mountain<sup>2</sup>, sometimes referred to as “deep ecology.”

As your memory improves, as the implications of evolution and ecology are internalized and replace the outmoded anthropocentric structures in your mind, there is an identification with all life. Then follows the realization that the distinction between “life” and “lifeless” is a human construct.

Every atom in this body existed before organic life emerged 4,000 million years ago. Remember our childhood as minerals, as lava, as rocks?

Rocks contain the potentiality to weave themselves into such stuff as this. We are the rocks dancing. Why do we look down on them with such a condescending air? It is they that are the immortal part of us.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 9:2

<sup>2</sup> “The forester ecologist Aldo Leopold underwent a dramatic conversion from the ‘stewardship’ shall ecology resource-management mentality of man-over-nature to announce that humans should see themselves as ‘plain members’ of the biotic community. After the conversion, Leopold saw steadily, and with ‘shining clarity’ as he broke through the anthropocentric illusions of his time and began ‘thinking like a mountain.’” George Sessions, “Spinoza, Perennial Philosophy, and Deep Ecology”, unpublished manuscript, Sierra College, Rocklin, California, 1979. See also Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, Ballantine, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Prominent physicists such as David Bohm (*Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Routledge, 1980) and biologists such as Charles Birch and John Cobb, Jr. (*The Liberation of Life*, Cambridge, 1981) would

If we embark upon such an inner voyage, we may find, upon returning to contemporary consensus reality, that our actions on behalf of the environment are purified and strengthened by the experience.

We have found here a level of our being that moth, rust, nuclear holocaust or destruction of the rainforest gene pool do not corrupt. The commitment to save the world is not decreased by the new perspective, although the fear and anxiety which were part of our motivation start to dissipate and are replaced by a certain disinterestedness. We act because life is the only game in town, but actions from a disinterested, less attached consciousness may be more effective.

Activists often don't have much time for meditation. The disinterested space we find here may be similar to meditation. Some teachers of meditation are embracing deep ecology<sup>4</sup> and vice versa.<sup>5</sup>

Of all the species that have ever existed, it is estimated that less than one in a hundred exist today. The rest are extinct. As environment changes, any species that is unable to adapt, to change, to evolve, is extinguished. All evolution takes place in this fashion. In this way an oxygen-starved fish, ancestor of yours and mine, commenced to colonize the land. Threat of extinction is the potter's hand that molds all the forms of life.

The human species is one of millions threatened by imminent extinction through nuclear war and other environmental changes. And while it is true that the "human nature" revealed by 12,000 years of written history does not offer much hope that we can change our warlike, greedy, ignorant ways, the vastly longer fossil history assures us that we can change. We are that fish, and the myriad other death-defying feats of flexibility which a study of evolution reveals to us. A certain confidence (in spite of our recent "humanity") is warranted.

From this point of view, the threat of extinction appears as the invitation to change, to evolve. After a brief respite from the potter's hand, here we are back on the wheel

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agree with Alfred North Whitehead that a "thoroughgoing evolutionary philosophy is inconsistent with materialism. The aboriginal stuff, or material from which a materialistic philosophy starts is incapable of evolution." (Science and the Modern World, Fontana, 1975, p. 133). Similar views to those of these authors on the interpenetration of all "matter" (better conceived of as "events") are developed in Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*, while the sixth century B.C. *Tao Te Ching* itself tells us that "Tao" or "the implicate order" as Bohm might say, "is the source of the ten thousand things."

<sup>4</sup> "For Dogen Zenji, the others who are 'none other than myself' include mountains, rivers, and the great earth. When one thinks like a mountain, one thinks also like the black bear, and this is a step to deep ecology, which requires openness to the black bear, becoming truly intimate with the black bear, so that honey dribbles down your fur as you catch the bus to work." Robert Aitken Roshi, Zen Buddhist teacher, as "Gandhi, Dogen and Deep Ecology", *Zero* magazine, reprinted in Bill Devall & George Sessions *Deep Ecology*, Peregrine Smith, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Roszak, for example, has written in *Person/Planet*: "I sometimes think there could be no keener criterion to measure our readiness for an economics of permanence than silence." Roszak has argued eloquently in another context that, if ecology is to work in the service of transforming consciousness, it will be because its students recognize the truth contained in a single line of poetry by Kathleen Raine: "It is not birds that speak, but men learn silence." See *Where the Wasteland Ends*.

again. The change that is required of us is not some new resistance to radiation, but a change in consciousness. Deep ecology is the search for a viable consciousness.

Surely consciousness emerged and evolved according to the same laws as everything else — molded by environmental pressures. In the recent past, when faced with intolerable environmental pressures, the mind of our ancestors must time and again have been forced to transcend itself.

To survive our current environmental pressures, we must consciously remember our evolutionary and ecological inheritance. We must learn to think like a mountain.

If we are to be open to evolving a new consciousness, we must fully face up to our impending extinction (the ultimate environmental pressure). This means acknowledging that part of us which shies away from the truth, hides in intoxication or busyness from the despair of the human, whose 4,000 million year race is run, whose organic life is a mere hair's breadth from finished.<sup>6</sup>

A biocentric perspective, the realization that rocks will dance, and that roots go deeper than 4,000 million years, may give us the courage to face despair and break through to a more viable consciousness, one that is sustainable and in harmony with life again.

“Protecting something as wide as this planet is still an abstraction for many. Yet I see the day in our own lifetime that reverence for the natural systems — the oceans, the rainforests, the soil, the grasslands, and all other living things — will be so strong that no narrow ideology based upon politics or economics will overcome it.”<sup>7</sup>

The term “deep ecology” was coined by the Norwegian professor of Philosophy and eco-activist Arne Naess, and has been taken up by academics and environmentalists in Europe, the U.S., and Australia. Arne Naess puts it this way:

“The essence of deep ecology is to ask deeper questions... We ask which society, which education, which form of religion is beneficial to all life on the planet as a whole.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For the creative uses of despair, see Joanna Macy, “Despair Work”, *Evolutionary Blues*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1981) P.O. Box 448, Arcata, CA 95521. For a long look at our impending extinction, see Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth*.

<sup>7</sup> Governor Jerry Brown of California, quoted in *Not Man Apart* Vol 9, No. 9, Aug., 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Arne Naess by The Ten Directions, *Zen Centre of Los Angeles Newsletter*, Summer/Fall, 1982.

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