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HOLISM AND ECOLOGY

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Geneva, January 1981

Johan Galtung

This paper is being circulated in a pre-publication form to elicit comments from readers and generate dialogue on the subject at this stage of the research.

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THE PRIMACY OF THE WHOLE

Arne Naess

I. FROM THE WHOLE TOWARDS FIVE POINTS

In the industrial states environmental concerns are increasingly being felt as threats to employment and economic growth. Even some environmentalists have announced that "the ecological wave" is spent. I would rather say that such waves are growing, but that the continued policy of economic growth generates increasing toughness of resistance against those waves. When fighting this resistance one of the many assets would be a clear grasp of the philosophical issues involved. Change of economic policy requires change of value priorities. What follows are some conclusions I have reached and tried to substantiate theoretically in various publications and expressed practically in various environmental actions. The conclusions are shared by a small but active minority.

In what follows I try to outline a fundamental way of thinking which is implicit in some of the contemporary approaches to environmental problems. First, a tendency to think in terms of forms or fields rather than things and atoms. Second, an effort to understand the particulars in the light of more comprehensive particulars or wholes (not the same as generalities). Third, there is an "animal liberation" movement, or, more generally, an increase of solidarity with other species and life as a whole, ultimately with our planet as a whole. Fourth, an increased respect and love of Nature resulting in reinvestment of some of the religious feelings which characterize many non-industrial societies. Spinoza's thinking in terms of "God or Nature" is here relevant. Fifth, the tendency to act through change of life style and through participation in social and political work in favour of basic environment values.

II. THE FIVE POINTS TAKEN SEPARATELY

Gestalt-thinking, not atomism¹. The most elementary illustration of life as gestalts rather than as things among things is that of the three points on the blackboard or in the landscape: we see the three together as a form, a structure, a triangle, with properties that cannot be reconstructed, if we try to "add" the properties of each point abstracted from the immediately-given wholeness of the 3-point-gestalt. A human being is not an organism with an environment, or a spirit imprisoned in a material world, but an everchanging whole from which we abstract such concepts.

The gestalt is not a thing, and the relation between higher-order, more complex gestalts and the less complex is not that of a bigger container or heap to the smaller.

A melody which, atomically considered, consists of 6 tones in succession changes significantly if the order of succession is altered. Of the 719 possible alterations, nearly all destroy the melody, that is the whole, or more exactly the gestalt, constituting the melody itself. On the other hand, the melody can be played by hundreds of instruments and orchestrations. The pitch can be altered, and a great variety of other variables, without altering the identity of the melody. But as a piece of music, that is, as a lower order gestalt contained in definite higher order gestalts, it changes. The "parts" of the richer or more complex gestalt are determined by the whole - to a greater or smaller extent (Wertheimer). If the

1. The term "gestalt" is not any longer written with capital G: a good sign that gestalt thinking gets to be familiar.
- 2.

piece of music is a national anthem, it acquires very distinct new qualities due to being contained in a gestalt of still higher order, those of national symbols and rites. These again are parts of ways of life and of total cultures.

Applied to environmental problems, gestalt thinking immediately recognizes the importance of life and behaviour spaces in contrast to physical and geographical space. Human beings cannot be separated from gestalts comprising their body and its physical environment. The genesis of selfhood and self-respect depends upon formation of gestalts such as "home" as contrasted with mere "house", "forest" and "field" as contrasted with mere multiplicity of trees and grass.

The gestalts "bridge in landscape" and "landscape with bridge" may be experienced as beautiful and having other positive qualities which environmentalists gladly acknowledge, but the gestalt of the landscape without any bridge or formidable technical structure is extremely different. One of our concerns is the banal fact that the latter kind tend to be extinct in our industrial countries.

"To get deep into a wood" is a gestalt that vanishes with roads and mechanical transportation. Atomistic reasoning measures deepness in kilometers. Combined with narrowly anthropocentric utilitarianism we get the wood full of big roads with all kinds of "facilities" and "services".

The advent of agriculture changed landscape gestalts considerably over vast areas of the earth. But people worked and lived with the land in an intimate way. Gestalts comprised work relations. Characteristic of the destruction of gestalts due to commercial tourism is the down-grading of their complexity and order until mere esthetical and entertainment aspects remain. Life in the mountains as hunters and gatherers degenerated into anthropocentric "conquests" of mountains. Sherpa feasts in honour of mountains changed into stultifying acclaim of their subduers.

One of the great aims of today is the establishment of ecologically sane ways of life in nature, which again implies the reestablishment of work, not mere recuperation or sport, in complex natural settings.

The words for the highest order, most inclusive gestalt, if there can be said to be something like that, are many - "Cosmos", "the ultimate whole", "Nature" with capital N.

Thinking from the more comprehensive to the less.

Environmental action requires realistic assessment of facts and forces, but the more comprehensive framework of action, the better. The gestalts human being / environment or society / environment belong to the low order gestalts which may block the way to more comprehensive and deep perspectives. "How much further development can the environment sustain?" exemplifies questions of the narrow kind. The proper framework, as far as I can understand, is always the whole, cosmos or "Nature with capital N". As a point of departure resources are not resources for human consumption, but resources for living beings of every kind. A pollution is a resource at a wrong place for a farmer, possibly at the right place for a rat. - Bio-spherical egalitarianism accepts a general right to live and blossom. Some interests are human interests, others are not. Contradictions abound, some healthy, some morbid.

Human nature is such that, given favourable conditions of development, we identify and feel solidarity with all life forms. Therefore we not only talk of human natural resources but distinguish between resources of each species of animals and plants. The conflicting interests are of course legion and at least in the foreseeable future most are irreducible. The basic resources of many kinds of wading birds are severely reduced if the plan to build a centre for the disposal of nuclear waste at Gorleben (Germany) is realized. The area is on northern Europe's most important wet lands. Considering that the consumption of energy in the overdeveloped countries is out of touch with basic needs, some ecological policy implies rejection of the plan. In areas of human famine and energy shortage,

conflicting resource interests necessitate solutions - at least temporarily - in favour of the human species.

In the North Sea "cremation" of living birds goes on on a vast scale because of the attraction of the fire from gas outlets during nights. Here again sanity implies a change of technology, but the preoccupation with more "pressing" problems leads to inhuman policies toward fellow beings. And in the service of an energy consumption that does not serve basic human, or other, values.

The age of "war" against certain insects is not over. On the contrary, it might be intensified considering the vast suffering of mammals, for instance cattle, from certain parasites. The nearness to us and the sensitivity of the mammals justifies killing of insects on a large scale today. In the distant future such wars can perhaps be avoided, but the ways humans make use of their intellectual resources suggest that ecological policies will remain cruel, crude and wasteful for a long time.

Narrowing down the perspective we acknowledge the special rights and duties of humans: each of us has more duties towards our nearest family and friends than towards fellow humans in general, and more duties towards our own society than towards others. Extreme suffering or inequality in distribution of resources may, however, force us to reach far out, far away geographically or in terms of species. We have a duty not to induce rats through stupid allocation of waste to multiply in a way detrimental to "us". The principle of bio-spherical egalitarianism has as one of its implications the egalitarianism of cultures and societies, humans and non-human. Cultures are now destroyed through lack of respect and understanding - and by means of what today corresponds to the glass-pearls at the time of Livingstone, easy money, industrialization, commercial tourism.

Nature with capital N and bio-spherical egalitarianism are today by important sections within the leadership of the workers' unions con-

sidered to be romantic moonshine, or rather, believed to be so considered among the workers. But this is a false belief. What is more correct is to say that workers on the whole try to adapt to a life in an environment of poor quality, and therefore try to keep such thoughts and feelings at safe distance.

Implicit in the policies of modern welfare communities we find the utilitarian principle "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". Applied to all sentient beings a more realistic maxim is "the smallest suffering to the smallest number". The largely uncontrolled expansion of the human species (much to the detriment of itself) has created a movement in favour of minimizing the intense sufferings of fellow beings, whatever the species.

Against the generalized utilitarian principle and the closely related bio-spherical egalitarianism two objections are raised by those who have not yet acquainted themselves with their exact meaning:

They lead to absurd consequences: for instance, that we should let every species multiply whatever the consequences to humans and to other species. Wild life "management" would be prohibited.

That only the most fanatical nature worshippers would agree to such principles.

Answering the first objection it is most convenient to point to utilitarian policies since Bentham: they have been complex and full of compromises. The same is, and will be, in the case of the more general principles. The old rules imply differences in priorities: the near have priority over the distant. Family over friends, suffering in own nation over suffering in other nations. Some will add own race over other races. Ethically most of the priority rules can be justified in terms of power to help: we are supposed to have most potentialities in our intimate life with our nearest. We know better their needs, our duties are clearer and stronger. In short: the general, abstract principles do not work in a vacuum, but in a social framework. The general principles introduce widening concepts

of society. This is the clear tendency in the modern "management" of wolves, bears, eagles and certain other high status mammals and birds of Scandinavia. Their "rights" are safeguarded to a large extent - sometimes to the detriment of interests of humans, sheep and certain other species. (The sheepowners fully agree that carnivores should not be exterminated!)

As to the second objection, all abstract and general principles seem at the first glance to lead to fanaticism, if followed strictly. But the very function of such maxims is to operate in conjunction with a system of norms and hypotheses. "Do not do to others what you would not like others to do to yourself" is a good rule of thumb, but operating alone it would lead to absurdities. If high up in the mountains we need to find a place to the north of us, a compass may help, but not if we only use its indication when we take the next step.

Humans still try to exterminate rats through poison and other means which sometimes are highly painful to these sensitive mammals. Experts tell people that the eradication of 99% of rats at a certain locality does not prevent the place from being overrun after a short while. The way to approach the problem is to change garbage policy and take certain minimum precautions when building houses. Wise rat management turns rats into interesting fellow beings. On the whole, genuine interest based on solidarity with life forms is the firm basis of getting rid of pests and unnecessary, intense suffering. "Fight against nature" is one of the most ill-conceived human slogans. On the whole, what is good for rats is good for us.

One must remember, however, that the word "nature" has, at least, half a dozen different connotations. One, in the terminological tradition of Descartes-Bacon-Hegel-Marx, concentrates on the obstacles experienced when humans try to utilize materials for satisfying basic needs. To transport water from a wet to an arid zone is a fight against "nature" according to this way of speaking. The wonderful amount of water in the wet zone and the marvellous fertility of soil in the arid do of course not count as a richness and gift of "nature" in this sense.

Spinoza's "Deus sive Natura", and active understanding. Goethe and others within the European tradition who experience Nature in a large and deep sense tend to acknowledge Spinoza as the supreme articulation of that experience. Spinoza, in turn, has some roots in the Near East and Far East tradition of "oneness with the whole" and of soft interaction with everything: fellow humans, animals, plants, and the gestalts they are abstracted from. But Spinoza has also roots in the individualistic and activist renaissance, and in the western natural science tradition. His basic notion of understanding (intelligere) presupposes action and knowledge as a unity. What we understand reveals itself only in and through action when this word is taken in a broad sense. Scientific growth is, to take an example, only growth of understanding if and as manifested in action, individual or collective. There is no knowledge in archives and libraries. His "understanding love of God" (amor intellectualis Dei) is through his famous equation "God or Nature" (Deus sive Natura), understanding of Nature through active interaction with particulars, not vague general understanding. He points to the possibility of regaining some of the holiness and integrity in our dealings with that which is greater than ourselves. He in a way puts God into nature and this implies that we lift the usual concept of nature (with its corollary, the "fight against, and conquest of, nature") up to a higher level, the all-embracing whole, Nature with capital N. His notion of "love of God" is equivalent to his notion of "God's love" of us. Substituting "Nature" for "God" we arrive at a notion of Nature's love of us utterly incompatible with the illusion of opposition of culture and nature and of the "fight" against nature.

So much about Spinoza. There are of course other deep sources of articulation of basic intuitions. Articulation is not the most important, however: many who never heard of and really do not need to hear about Spinoza nevertheless share his kind of intuitive conception of Nature, and seriously wish to act more in conformity with it. How can conditions be made more favorable for this to be practicable?

To find our place on the long front of action. Unfortunately, there is a suspicion that global thinking, in the way suggested above, is incompatible with doing a concrete job somewhere along the immense front of environmental action. But the slogan "Global thinking, local action" expresses not only the compatibility, but even the necessity of a combination. We have in our midst colleagues whose life style is formed in harmony with that slogan. Others were not able to come to this meeting just because of their local preoccupations. If they came, their attention would irresistibly be drawn towards the grave environmental problems facing the mountain peasants working outside the windows of our comfortable conference building.

One place along the front may perhaps be characterized by efforts to connect more closely the philosophical, artistic and religious environmental thinking with concrete environmental campaigns and actions.

III. CONCLUSION

The above suggests that unecological thinking is thinking in terms of sectors and aspects rather than in terms of hierarchies of wholes. The motto of my address might therefore have been "The primacy of wholes" rather than "The primacy of the whole". But the basic sentiment in the environmental struggle, I think, is that of respect for an ultimate whole or reality embracing all of us here, and infinitely more.

THE WORLD AS A CREATURE OF CREATURES

Danilo Dolci

The earth is becoming one city; its continents are neighborhoods. But most human beings are not aware of this, and rather than develop an organic terrestrial city, they keep spawning an abortion of a community.

Humans, with their impoverished imagination and monstrous presumption, cannot see or understand how flower upon flower evolves in the fields--horizontally, vertically, spherically, in the most variegated combinations--and allows even the smallest flower to breathe and thrive in infinite ways. We think Chicago is really a city, not realizing the way flowers arrange their "urban centers" is more intelligent than our city planning.

Ambience, environment: what does it mean? We say it is what "surrounds" us--but who is it made for? Devoid of imagination and presumptuous, man thinks he is the "measure of all things"--not just one of the measures.

Trying to conceive a reality where every expression of life can grow to be plentiful, where the unripe is not devoured and parasitism is eliminated, meditating and excavating more profoundly, we can perhaps see the whole world as one unique creature, as a creature of creatures. (Creaturus means "what can be created," but our language has lost this sense, implicit in the root-word, of possible, future development.)

Essential to our sights, our conception of a world that is not suicidal, are what I would call "meditative fronts":

-This creature of creatures is hardly aware of existing: the new process of conceiving means to suffer the birth pangs and the vertigo of the newborn.

-In a certain sense, it is not possible to conceive an absolute "thou": we should not have skin that is a wall.

-There is no life without breathing in and out: together.

-What is far can be near.

What is near can be far.

-Worse than machine-guns or bombs, the instruments of those who have given up totally, is the extermination done when we impoverish our imagination, resign ourselves to waste, despair.

-The creature must never yield to the flood of events, never let himself be eroded and swept away.

- Do not be a counterfeit of the past: you cannot resist by imitating.

-Cosmic cannibalism shocks us only in plain view.

-Cosmic incest shocks us only in plain view.

-The creature blossoms generating a new creature.

-Do not be a tick: conjoin, confecundate.

-We must learn how to see time: paths through the living earth, forked and intersecting, are full of boundless pitfalls.

-Fragmented vision makes things crumble: if sight performs vivisections, it kills.

-The fragment's search for ways to resist fragmenting is attempt to become creature (some have called it love).

-To integrate is unity: but which unity? What way of integrating?

-Looking disintegrates into infinite eyes: sometimes the waves of seeing go deeper into depths.

-Listening is fragmented in endless islands of ears: sometimes the waves of hearing go deeper into depths.

-It is too late to be attendant to the infinite births: invent a new creature by sowing breath: by changing the matrices of history.

Danilo Dolci was born in Northern Italy, in 1924. With a "promising future" in architecture ahead of him, he decided to leave the profession, and become involved in work more basic than urban planning or building design. After participating in community living experiments, he moved, in 1952, to Trappeto, then on to Partinico (both towns in Western Sicily). With the local population, mostly peasants and fishermen, he helped initiate a series of communal "researches" with a view to analyzing the real needs of the area and its possible courses of action.

In 1957, the Center for Studies and Initiatives was set into motion. Having conceived it through in-depth discussions about waste of energy and resources and the vital issue of unemployment, the local people decided together not to adopt external models but to discover living roots of development in the indigenous culture. With a program of non-violent actions, they exerted pressure on the Italian government to build a large dam on the Jato River.

This first dam provided leverage for structural change. The people involved were careful to have the water distributed democratically--not as the Mafia dictated. To get water at a fair price, the peasants gradually organized, making themselves the democratic alternative to the old Mafia power-block. (After this dam was operating, the inhabitants of Western Sicily proposed the building of eleven more dams. Their proposal was accepted by regional and federal authorities as part of the 1978 plan to reclaim this earthquake-ridden area and to develop the new conception of a "territorial-city".)

The local people were also successful in blocking the construction of an oil-refinery in Castellamare Bay--in spite of heavy pressures of near-sighted power-groups (political parties and unions included) to have it built.

The ongoing work to develop the area involves the study and utilization of the most diversified natural and human resources: once burned to clear land, wood (olive, almond, carob, lemon, orange) is now put to other uses by skilled artisans; the musical traditions are being preserved and revitalized; new experimental methods in education are being applied (by the Training Center at Trappeto and Mirto); and cooperatives and research centers are committed to evaluating and putting to good use aspects of local climate and culture.

Bibliography:

Justin Vitiello is responsible for the forthcoming American publication of the following works of Danilo Dolci:

- Sicilian Stories (the people's self-expression and analysis)
- Creature of Creatures (poetry)
- Experiences and Reflections (documentation and theory)