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Anthropocentrism, Transhumanism and Ecological consciousness

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Why is knowledge of the ecological crisis insufficient to bring about appropriate action? Most human-produced carbon dioxide has been emitted over the past three decades while we have known about the consequences. Why, then, are we unwilling or unable to act appropriately? As a philosopher, I am less concerned with the psychological aspects of this problem than with our thinking itself: is thought as it should be?

Anthropocentrism

Pope Francis has indicated that the root of the problem lies in excessive anthropocentrism, prizing technical thought over reality.² Renewed attention to reality and the limits it imposes may enable us to ‘realise that we live and act on the basis of a reality which has previously been given to us, which precedes

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2 Pope Francis, Enc. *Laudato si'*, paras 115, 116.

our existence and our abilities.³ What is required is an integral and integrating vision.⁴ Today I wish to develop this diagnosis in a distinctive direction.

To summarise briefly, anthropocentrism is founded upon complementary presuppositions which are also ideals to be realised: the myth of the self-sufficient, individual will and the myth of the people as the source of values. The individual will and the will of the people are treated as both facts and values; yet since they are never fully realised, a purely technical thought is invoked to extend human powers beyond their given limits – let us call this thought transhumanism. While this is intended to empower the individual will and realise the values of the people, in practice it requires that people adapt their lives to machines, processes and systems of their own devising.⁵ Adaptation to this humanly-constructed environment comes at the cost of adaptation to the natural environment. For instead of liberating humanity from its dependency on natural resources and living systems, this artificial environment merely substitutes for it in our imagination, attention, and action. Ecological consciousness, by contrast, starts with awareness that modern life has damaged, along with ecosystems, species and the global climate, thinking itself. Ecological thought thinks our interconnectedness with other living and non-living things.⁶ So this is my conclusion: knowledge of the ecological crisis does not result in appropriate action because human beings are constrained to adapt to an artificial environment, not the actual one.

Many attribute ecological harms to individual choices: for example, the second largest contributor to the growth of carbon emissions globally over the past eight years has been people switching from normal cars to Sports Utility Vehicles, large cars.⁷ In one respect, this is a matter of personal responsibility, and future generations may judge as to be the most self-absorbed, irrational and destructive generation that has ever lived. In another respect, the possibility of individual choice is itself socially-constructed as an ideal to be realised: there is a global marketplace for vehicles in which consumers are not

3 *Ibidem*, para. 140.

4 *Ibidem*, para. 141.

5 See especially S. Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, transl. Arthur Wills and John Petrie, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1958.

6 T. Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2010, 3, 7.

7 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2019/oct/25/suvs-second-biggest-cause-of-emissions-rise-figures-reveal>.

held accountable for their purchases, even if they are accountable for driving within the bounds of the law. This is anthropocentrism embodied in our institutions. The car materialises an anthropocentric ideal: the human will, safely enclosed within a metal casing and alienated from the surrounding landscape and people, directs its course where it pleases with power and speed – even if it can only travel where a viable road network has been built in advance. While car travel epitomises individual freedom, it cannot exist without a socially-prepared environment and accountability to other road users. Perhaps, then the switch from a normal car to an SUV represents frustrated attempts to realise every more fully the vain and unrealisable goal of autonomy. For freedom can only coexist with accountability – and accountability is another ideal of anthropocentrism.

It is easy to accuse those who despoil the planet – who set fire, for example, to virgin forests – of having an exaggerated notion of self-sufficiency. They damage that upon which we all depend. They lack consciousness of accountability before God, other people, future generations, or the wider world. The question of accountability may be posed in this way: do my conduct, speech and ideas constitute a credit or deficit, and in what respects? Do I enrich the world with my presence, or do I impoverish it? Have I fulfilled all my obligations to others, or have I laid obligations upon others? These may seem like strange questions to ask, and indeed they are, for it is difficult to know what criteria to invoke when judging oneself or others. Let us take, as an example, one widely used but highly imperfect system of accountability: money. Most people acquire money through offering some good, service, or labour to those who require these, receiving money in return. Others acquire money by investing or lending property or money to those who have need. As such, these have done some service to others, and the money that they possess may be treated as an indicator that they are in credit, that they have fulfilled their obligations to society, and that they deserve to be treated with recognition and respect, fulfilling their requirements in turn. Of course, everyone knows that money can be acquired in other ways which do not contribute to the common good, such as theft, exploitation, inheritance, speculation, fraud and forgery. Nevertheless, imperfect as this system of accountability is, it is adopted for the sake of its convenience. Possessing money is an imperfect way of demonstrating one's accountability before the people.

Higher standards are often unrealistic, for one cannot be accountable for one's entire conduct and in all respects, except before God. Nevertheless,

there are occasions when higher standards of accountability are required, and money does not talk – its usage amounting to bribery. When held accountable before others, one can endeavour to explain one's reasoning in order to receive judgement and correction. More commonly, however, the questions are put by those to whom one is responsible, and these questions are determined in advance as an agreed set of systems and procedures. Consider filling in a form as an exercise in bureaucratic validation: on the one hand, filling in a form is a simple procedure – one endeavours to make certain aspects of one's life, such as name, address and identity, transparent to whichever authority reads the form. Yet forms typically require something else: a personal signature to validate the information, and a subsequent act of approval by the relevant authority. Where a simple conversation fails to achieve any validation or authorisation, the formal rituals of bureaucracy succeed in making one accountable. Where offering a bribe would simply reward the individual official involved, bureaucracy is intended to make one accountable to the people as a whole. In practice, of course, this is again an imperfect system: the people as a whole do not read and validate all bureaucratic forms. Only their representatives who have internalised bureaucratic expectations and norms do so.

My point is this: markets and bureaucracies are institutions which in some sense construct as roles what they already presuppose – the free individual will, and people before whom any individual is accountable. Anthropocentrism is built into modern social life. Human beings come to occupy these roles by conscientiously adapting to a socially-constructed reality.

Moreover, having fulfilled one's responsibilities to the people through the market or through institutions, one receives as a mark of approval some sign that one has done so. One may then feel entirely free to do as one pleases – including driving one's car where one wishes. For power, once earned, is all about, as the anthropologist David Graeber has remarked, 'what you *don't* have to worry about, *don't* have to know about, and *don't* have to do.'⁸ Whatever one's degree of power, the struggle for recognition is a struggle for a sense of entitlement to self-sufficiency.

8 D. Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, Melville, New York 2016, 101.

Transhumanism epitomises this aspiration

‘Transhumanism’ is a term normally applied to the belief that the human condition can be transcended in some fundamental way, whether by constructing second lives in virtual reality, indefinitely increasing longevity, genetically modifying the human organism, constructing colonies on other planets, replacing humans with artificial intelligences, or uploading minds onto computers. I don’t wish to waste your time on such denials of given ecological bonds except to suggest that, in a related sense, the human condition has always been transhuman – we have always relied on products of our own making, products which both enhance and constrain our behaviour – at least since we developed language.

Our own products, rituals and aspirations, whether real or imaginary, constitute part of the human habitat. There remains a deep continuity between trying to put knowledge into printed words and trying to upload minds onto computers. As a personal example, I am already a ‘transhuman being’ since my body is kept alive by means of injections of synthetic insulin manufactured in Denmark; as a result, I have to monitor and regulate the homeostasis of my own organism artificially and consciously, whereas others do this naturally and without consciousness. Yet there is no difference in kind between my own organic dependence upon markets and institutions and the dependence of others. For we all depend physically upon a technological, social, economic and bureaucratic world of our own making. Moreover, just as I monitor and regulate my own body through my conduct, we have all internalised the thought structures, the methods of learning, the distributions of care and attention with which we adapt to this artificial environment. In this respect, those who are well-adjusted to their responsibilities within this human environment may also be those who are least adjusted to their natural environment, since they rarely encounter it.

The notion of ‘transhumanism’ can be taken in two senses: on the one hand, it can be seen as an aspiration to self-sufficiency and autonomy by technical means, transcending the human condition by constructing supporting structures that replace the given environment; on the other hand, transhumanism can mean the recognition that essential elements of the human organism exist outside the boundaries of human skin, whether these are found in the given environment or are constructed through our language, ideas, technology and institutions. There is some overlap between

these senses, such as in the role attributed to technology, yet the aspiration for self-sufficiency works against ecological consciousness, while the recognition of interconnectedness contributes towards it. The key issue is how our ecology of attention is shaped.⁹

Ecological consciousness

Now 'ecological consciousness' is also an ambiguous term. This could be taken to mean some conversance with the scientific methods used by ecologists, whether landscape ecologists, physiological ecologists, population ecologists, behavioural ecologists, ecosystem ecologists, or community ecologists.¹⁰ It could refer to a scientific understanding of the biodiversity, climate and pollution crises, or moral awareness of their significance. It could refer to awareness of measures of one's carbon footprint. It could refer to deliberate attention to the nonhuman and non-living presences in one's immediate environment. Yet each of these are ways of asserting oneself in relation to the world: they are grounded in the primacy of the knowing and acting subject over against the world. The thinking subject, as understood by Enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, has self-sufficiency as its right and destiny.

By contrast, when I refer to 'ecological consciousness', I mean awareness of other powers and entities which impinge within and upon human subjectivity: for example, agency and knowledge depend on the presence of other living organisms within the human body such as mitochondria and bacteria; on the flow of blood to the brain; on the passage of time; on the laws of nature; as well as upon living within a habitable environment with which the human body, mind and spirit is in continual interaction.

In other words, ecological consciousness involves self-awareness as a finite creature in dependent relations with other finite creatures. In this respect, we live, move and have our being on the basis of biodiversity and a stable climate. It is therefore natural to extend the notion of the common good from that of the community to that of the planet: just as a good life requires

⁹ See further Y. Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*, transl. Barnaby Norman, Polity, Cambridge 2017.

¹⁰ See further S. Esbjörn-Hargens, M. E. Zimmerman, *Integral Ecology: Uniting Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World*, Integral Books, Boston MA 2009.

a healthy community, it also requires a thriving ecosystem, replete with biodiversity and climate stability.

Ecological consciousness, in this sense, is an extension of historical consciousness, which is itself an extension of political consciousness: we do not only live in a given historical epoch, with its customs, assumptions, concepts, aspirations, and beliefs about what is right, but we also live within a given ecosystem, where external entities are conditions of possibility of us being human at all. Just as we could not live human lives without parents and carers, we could not live human lives without vegetation and minerals, nor could we live human lives without words and institutions.

I would like to offer an illustration of ecological consciousness in terms of the human lifespan: as a finite being, I do not see my lifespan as a whole, but only occupy a niche within it – the present moment. To be sure, I can endeavour to bring to bear on this present moment of experience, in a certain respect, all that I have eaten, all that I have digested, all that I have appropriated, all my habits, all my actions, all my experience, all my judgments, all that I have heard, read and understood. Yet I am not the author of my present moment of experience: your presence, this institutional situation, and the physical environment all contribute to the present moment, a moment in which I participate. Nevertheless, in and through my present contribution, I seek to offer something of value which may be digested and appropriated for future experiences, in some tiny way, whether those experiences pertain to myself or others. In this respect, at any one time, I only occupy a tiny portion of my lifespan, and make the smallest of contributions to my future – my life is not self-sufficient. Likewise, ecological consciousness is aware of how tiny a portion of the living planet each person occupies. The difficult question lies in discerning whether I enrich the planet or impoverish it.

So let me sum up: human beings continue to damage the planet because they are conscientiously adapted to markets, institutions and ideas of their own construction, both through their debts and obligations and through their aspirations for self-sufficiency and social recognition. For since these ideals are unachievable, people rely on technical instruments such as money and bureaucracy for validation, constructing a transhuman condition in which they serve the instruments invented to serve them. Ecological consciousness, by contrast, would result from attention to reality and the limits it imposes. We are limited by our dependency on other beings and their welfare; we are

also limited by time. As finite creatures, even our thought is produced within finite niches: the best we can do is appropriate what is given us, participate in present reality, and offer something to the future and others.¹¹ Such awareness is ecological consciousness.



¹¹ See further Ph. Goodchild, *Credit and Faith*, Rowman & Littlefield International, London 2019.