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TOWARD AN ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION – AN INTERVIEW WITH ARRAN GARE

Abstract

This interview focuses on Arran Gare's thinking about ecological civilization and its relationship to a new theoretical ecology, strong democracy and political philosophy based on "ecopoiesis" or "home-making." Gare believes that it is possible to create a global ecological civilization that empowers people to augment their ecological communities. Complex transformations of the social and economic organization of societies and a radical upheaval of our conceptions of what it means to be human are required to bring about this change to a new ecological (eco-human) culture.

Keywords: ecological civilization, ecopoiesis, humanity, strong democracy

Brief note about the interviewee:

Arran Gare is Associate Professor (Reader) in Philosophy and Cultural Inquiry at Swinburne University, and founder of the Joseph Needham Centre for Complex Processes Research. The focus of his research is transforming culture to create a global ecological civilization. He has published widely on environmental philosophy, process metaphysics and the metaphysical foundations of the sciences, the history of ideas, complexity theory, human ecology, economics, the emergent theory of mind, social and cultural theory, ethics and political philosophy. He is the author of a number of books, including *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (London: Routledge, 1995) *Nihilism Inc.: Environmental Destruction and the Metaphysics of Sustainability* (Sydney: Eco-Logical Press, 1996) and *The Philosophical Foundations*

of *Ecological Civilization: A Manifesto for the Future* (London: Routledge, 2017). In 2005 he founded the on-line journal *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, of which he is chief editor.



Alexander Kopytin (AK): In your article “Toward an Ecological Civilization: The Science, Ethics, and Politics of Eco-Poiesis,” you claim that ecology could serve as the foundation of an ‘Ecological Civilization’ and define ecology as the core science that embodies process metaphysics. Do you believe that we have to change the direction of human culture and development by providing the foundations for a new, global, ecological civilization? What is the cornerstone of your manifesto for the future, which postulates the philosophical foundations of such an ecological civilization?

Arran Gare (AG): It is clear that our current civilization is on a trajectory to global ecological destruction, so a major redirection of civilization is required. What this means is another matter. My claim is that modernity began as a major redirection of civilization, and in fact, was a new civilization. It originated in Western Europe and has come to dominate the world. Science replaced religion as the major discourse defining reality. Reductionist sciences assume that, ultimately, all phenomena must be explained through physics. This is scientific materialism. It has never been formulated entirely consistently, and is often accompanied by Cartesian dualism, despite its incoherence. Privileging mechanistic explanations, scientific materialists such as Thomas Hobbes redefined life and humanity and the ultimate goals of life. Seen as machines moved by appetites and aversions, the ultimate goal of humans is to achieve technological domination of nature, generated through competitive struggle between them for survival, and domination and satisfaction of appetites. Discourses inconsistent with scientific materialism co-existed with it, sometimes by accommodating to it, sometimes disguising themselves as consistent with it, and sometimes

genuinely challenging it. To begin with, the most potent challenges came from the humanities, exemplified by the work and influence of Giambattista Vico and Johann Herder. Later, the humanities accommodated themselves to the sciences, accepting their subordinate place in culture. Challenges to scientific materialism also came from within science itself, usually associated with some form of holism, but it is only recently that efforts to replace scientific materialism from within science are in a position to finally succeed. The core of this revolution in scientific thought is an ontology of relational processes where processes can be seen as partially self-causing, being components of each other without being reducible to each other. From this perspective, new processes can emerge that are not entirely explicable through the conditions of their emergence. These can be understood, but are not entirely predictable or controllable. The universe is genuinely creative, the future is to some degree indeterminate, and we can influence which possible futures will be realized. This scientific revolution involves redefining science and its place in culture, aligning it with the humanities and redefining humanity and its place in nature, upholding the value of life and again, redefining the ultimate goals of humanity. If successful it should create a new global civilization, effectively replacing the civilization of modernity.

AK: What elements are now being integrated in the recent development of theoretical ecology which involve a new way of understanding the nature of life and explain why the current civilization is collapsing? What is required to avoid such collapse?

AG: Early ecological thought studied biotic communities in which different organisms were seen to be in symbiotic relationships, modifying their environments to their mutual benefit, with these communities evolving to richer, more diverse systems. Being mainly descriptive, it was not taken seriously by most scientists. With the development of complexity theory, it has become possible to gain insight into the dynamics of ecosystems by creating abstract models of such communities. Non-linear thermodynamics, catastrophe theory, second order cybernetics, including the theory of autopoiesis, hierarchy theory, anticipatory systems theory and biosemiotics have all served to advance ecology in this way. Organisms are conceived as highly integrated ecosystems able to define their environments as their worlds. Hierarchy theory accords a central place to enabling constraints in the functioning of ecosystems. Semiosis, the production and interpretation

of signs, involves signs constraining interpretants, including formations and activities, in response to anticipations.

In my view, the notion of autopoiesis whereby organisms are seen to produce their own components, is still too mechanistic and does not give a place to emergence. The notion of ecopoiesis, implying the production of the conditions where components can emerge, overcomes this limitation and accords well with other developments in complexity theory, allowing these ideas to be generalized. Robert Ulanowicz argues that by virtue of its focus on complexity, ecology is now the most advanced science and could provide the forms of thinking required to overcome the logjams obstructing the advance of physics. The notion of constraint is particularly important from this perspective since the very being of primary entities is seen to be self-constraining or self-limiting. From the perspective of this new science, disease is associated with the breakdown of constraints, as occurs with cancerous growths in which cells forget their place in the body and multiply without constraint and destroy the conditions of their existence. Many of the organizations that have emerged with the civilization of modernity are such cancers where destruction of the conditions of the existence of human life is not recognized and activity is not constrained accordingly. Such behavior is legitimated by an implicit Cartesian dualism that identifies freedom with freedom from any constraint, while denying this to nature, or to dominated people.

AK: Based on Lovelock's "Gaia" hypothesis, process metaphysics, hierarchy theory and Peircian semiotics, and calling for strong democracy, you proposed an ethics and political philosophy based on "ecopoiesis" or "home-making," which is equated with augmenting the life of communities, both human and non-human. Could you please explain how you define this political philosophy of ecological civilization?

AG: According to Aristotle, politics is about organizing society to enable people to live the best possible lives. This is the first principle or *arche* of politics. The best possible life is a fulfilling and fulfilled life achieved through the pursuit of excellence. It is achieved by participating in public life concerned to uphold the conditions for living the best life and participating in efforts to advance knowledge. The complexity of the modern world has led to cynicism about or complete ignorance of this claimed first principle of politics. The notion of ecopoiesis facilitates its updating. It focuses attention on all the conditions for living the best possible life, not only of individuals but of communities at all scales, including broader biotic communities. Humanity should be conceived of

as communities of communities, participating in these broader biotic communities, and the whole of humanity should aim to augment the conditions of its multi-level component communities to realize their potential to augment the life of all these communities. These conditions of life are their “homes,” extending this notion to include the “home” of humanity – the current regime of the global ecosystem, the “homes” of national communities, local regions, cities and towns and non-human organisms and biotic communities, as well as the homes of individuals and families. A good “home” for people is not only a matter of architecture and town planning; it is one in which they have security, can realize their potential to augment life, can assert themselves without fear of retribution, and can govern themselves. Homes are the condition for genuine communities and for living a fulfilling life by augmenting the life of these communities. A successful precursor to such politics was the policy of ‘folkhemmet’ of the Swedish Social Democratic Party from 1932 to 1976 – conceiving society as the ‘people’s home’ with no unwanted stepchildren.

AK: What is strong democracy, and how can it counteract the concentrations of power in the hands of global corporations?

AG: Strong democracy is a term coined by Benjamin Barber based on his study of Switzerland. It is associated with taking the notion of citizenship very seriously, requiring adult members of communities to take responsibility for the future of their communities and participate in their governance. It requires education, institutions and media to achieve the required wisdom to perform this function properly. It is best achieved through a federal structure which decentralizes power as much as possible, but requires more local communities to take seriously the common good of broader communities. Essentially, it is democratic federalism. This can be extended to the whole of humanity, and the biotic communities of which humans are part, including Gaia. Strong democracy involves the subordination of markets to these communities. The localization of political power and economic processes and decision-making wherever possible would allow people to more easily identify exploitation and oppression and eliminate them. The struggle for this is a struggle against the global corporatocracy and their political allies, and should be waged as a struggle for liberation to prevent global ecological destruction.

AK: What could it mean to create an ecological civilization as the successor to agricultural and industrial civilizations? What do you mean

by saying that to call for an ecological civilization is to call for a more democratic transformation?

AG: The Chinese refer to agricultural civilization, industrial civilization, political civilization and ecological civilization. For Chinese theorists of ecological civilization, these have always been part of civilization in a broader sense. Traditionally, the Chinese had a more developed ecological civilization than most other civilizations. Industrial civilization, massively advanced in the West and exported from there around the world, has seen a decay of ecological civilization. The new global ecological civilization will involve recognizing that this is the most important component of civilization, the condition for all other 'civilizations,' requiring the subordination of industrial civilization to ecological concerns. On a global scale, it involves a change in understanding of the relationship between countries and regions. Despite the League of Nations and the United Nations, modernity has been characterized by a struggle for hegemony between rival great powers. Ecological civilization as a quest involves the development of a global civilization allowing for diversity, with trans-culturalism rather than the cultural uniformity or multiculturalism. Diversity is valued, but it is assumed that diverse cultures should respect and learn from each other, and criticize each other. This is the essence of the Chinese notion of harmony and it is radically different from current civilization, although there are elements in current civilization foreshadowing it (ultimately deriving from the influence of Rousseau and Herder).

AK: What could you say about humanity: its relation to Gaia organization and its potential for cooperation, and creativity, from local communities to global civilization? Does humankind have a unique role in the evolution in global life? What role does the dialectic of culture play in the process of evolution?

AG: Most organisms are social in some degree and in symbiotic relation to diverse other species. According to biosemioticians, it is signs able to constrain activities that make these possible. Humans are uniquely social and capable of symbiosis by virtue of their much more complex forms of semiosis associated with culture, consisting of the dialectics of representation operating primarily through language, the dialectics of recognition operating primarily through institutions, and the dialectics of labor operating through technologies. The most under-appreciated dialectic is that of recognition. Since recognition can only be gained through recognizing the significance of others, this dialectic impels a concern for others and the common good. These dialectics are

components of each other without being reducible to each other and have an immanent tendency to extend themselves, according significance to more and more people as people strive for mutual recognition, deepening comprehension as people struggle to orient themselves, and advancing liberty as people struggle to control their destinies. Such recognition, comprehension and liberty are not merely subjective matters but have been progressively embodied in institutions, organizations and technology. Human sociality facilitated by culture has the potential through such cultural dialectics to encompass the whole of humanity and to extend beyond humanity to recognize the significance and intrinsic value of other life forms, including ecosystems and Gaia itself. Gaia can be seen as reaching its fullest understanding of itself and thereby its capacity to augment the conditions of its existence through these cultural processes, although these cultural processes can also pose a threat to Gaia.

AK: What relation do you see between sustainable development and the globalization of the economy? Can the global economy as it is defined now be sustainable at all?

AG: The current form of the globalized economy has disempowered local communities and is characterized by massive concentrated power in a global ruling class of managers based in transnational corporations. These power relations are inimical to achieving sustainable development. What are now required are institutions that can re-embed markets in communities, making markets serve the ends of these communities rather than enslaving communities to the logic of disembedded markets, manipulated to serve the interests of these global power elites. A global economy is unavoidable, but it needs to be radically transformed and economic life re-localized as much as possible.

AK: What are the ethics and politics of ecopoiesis? Is it possible to create a global civilization that empowers people to augment their ecological communities?

AG: The ethics and politics of ecopoiesis involve the claim that a good, fulfilling life is achieved by living to augment life. Once this is understood, the opposition between self-interest and morality can be overcome. Our 'homes' should be providing the conditions to develop our full potential to augment the life of our human and broader biotic communities, and the struggle for life should be seen as the struggle to augment these homes and thereby our power to augment life. This is

what liberty is all about, not freedom from constraints to exploit others and consume endlessly. The goal of politics should be to uphold and advance such liberty. The first condition for achieving liberty is having a clear idea of what we should be aiming at, and then working out how to achieve these ultimate ends. Ecological thinking, granting a central place to ecopoiesis, allows us not only to define our ends but to rethink how to go about achieving these ends through augmenting the conditions for the life and liberty of others, providing them with the niches where they themselves can work towards these ends, rather than reducing others to predictable instruments.

AK: Do you believe that conceptions of what humans are is at the core of cultures and that redefining humanity from the ecopoiesis perspective could help to resolve the major cultural, social and political conflicts within civilization?

AG: This I do believe. That conceptions of humans are the core of cultures became evident through comparative studies of cultures via history and anthropology. The current dominant conception of humans tacitly accepting a form of Cartesian dualism leads people to see nature as simply there to be controlled, or occasionally, to function as pleasant spectacles. An ecopoietic perspective situates us within nature, appreciating ourselves as components of the homes of others, both human and non-human, including huge numbers of micro-organisms which make up a significant part of our biomass and without which our bodies could not function. It forces us to appreciate our dependence on the life of ecosystems and to appreciate that we ourselves are part of the homes of others, and that living virtuously augments the homes of other members of our communities and augments the life of these communities.

AK: You claim that ethics is absolutely central to confronting the global ecological crisis. Meeting this crisis really involves a major transformation of culture, most importantly the culture promoted by defective forms of science such as mainstream economics, but also assumptions about what humans are and what is their place in nature embodied within and reproduced by social practices. Do you mean that people's reflection upon themselves and their culture will enable them to change the way they live on this planet?

AG: Reflection by people on themselves and their culture is clearly needed. It is astonishing how people tacitly accept thoroughly debasing notions of humans and life from economists, psychologists and

biologists without being horrified by their implications. However, there is another dimension to this reflection that makes it more complex. These notions can be embodied in practices and institutionalized without people acknowledging their beliefs. These tacitly held beliefs are then manifest in how they live and act, despite what they claim to believe. Even when people purport to be environmentalists, they often do not act as though mass destruction of ecosystems is of paramount importance because, tacitly, they have been inculcated in a scientific materialist conception of the world according to which all this is “creative destruction,” an inevitable aspect of evolutionary progress engendered by the competitive struggle for survival. From this perspective, to protect the weak, whether endangered species, ecosystems, communities or people by attempting to constrain the strong, is unnatural. To believe that it is even possible is naïve. To free themselves from these deep assumptions, people will have to learn how to question and reveal the possibility of replacing embodied beliefs, thereby transforming themselves, their real orientation to life and thereby their institutions and the way they organize themselves. This is what is required to transform society and civilization, not simply changing who occupies the positions of power.

AK: Since 2009, you have served as a consultant at the Research Office for [Ecological Civilization, Beijing, China](#). Could you please comment on what this involves?

AG: It has involved attending a few conferences in China and occasionally emailing people associated with this office with suggestions, sometimes quite practical. For instance, when I found how much greenhouse emissions were produced by China’s use of Portland cement, two billion tons of CO₂ a year, I promoted the use of geopolymers. It also involves elaborating the idea of ecological civilization. Last year I hosted a Ph.D. student from Beijing working on the notion of ecological civilization. I was invited this year to a conference at the Party School on ecological civilization, but this has been cancelled because of COVID-19.

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About the journal

“Ecopoiesis: Eco-Human Theory and Practice” is the first international multidisciplinary Journal focused on building an eco-human paradigm, disseminating eco-human knowledge and technology based on the alliance of ecology, humanities and the arts. Our journal aims to be a vibrant forum of theories and practices aimed at harmonizing the relations of mankind and the natural world in the interests of sustainable development, the creation of Eco-Humanity as a new community of human beings and more-than-human world. The human being is an ecological being, not separate from the world. The Ecopoiesis journal is based on that premise and aims to develop a body of theory and practice within that framework.

The Journal promotes dialogue and cooperation between ecologists, philosophers, doctors, educators, psychologists, artists, musicians, designers, social activists, business representatives in the name of eco-human values, human health and well-being, in close connection with concern for the environment. The Journal supports the development and implementation of new environmentally-friendly concepts, technologies and practices in the various fields of health and public life, education and social work.

One of the priority tasks of the Journal is to demonstrate and support the significant role of the arts in their alliance with ecology and the humanities for the restoration and development of constructive relations with nature, raising environmental awareness and promoting nature-friendly lifestyles.

The Journal publishes articles describing new eco-human concepts and practices, technologies and applied research data at the intersection of humanities, ecology and the arts, as well as interviews and conference reports related to the emerging eco-human field. It encourages artwork, music and other creative products related to eco-human practices and the new global community