



## College Quarterly

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### Where Have We Strayed To?

#### Exploring the Links Between Ecology and the Way We Live

*By Nirmal Dass*

Much postsecondary education is given over to training in vocational programs, which are intended to graduate people with marketable skills who can be snapped up by business and industry, become efficient producers and competent consumers and generally add material value to our economy.

Where education in the liberal arts is permitted even a subsidiary existence, there is often pressure to limit such studies to the dissemination of generic skills and to narrowly practical matters: hence, literature may be replaced by technical report writing or corporate communications; likewise, political economy is exchanged for human resource management or organizational psychology; and, philosophy is traded for business ethics.

Such initiatives are said to satisfy the needs of our society, which are quantified in short-term instrumental measures and understood uncritically where they are understood at all. As such the educational project becomes complicit in a far more damaging process that is toxic to ourselves, our society and our planet.

I

The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, in his delightful, disturbing and often infuriating essay, entitled, *The Question Concerning Technology*, summarizes a key principle of Western idealism: Questioning, he tells us, is the piety of thought (Heidegger, 1977, p. 35). And a little later on, in the same essay, he asks a simple and yet more profound question: "Where have we strayed to?" The principle and the question become fingerposts for the world we have come to inhabit, in which we have uncovered a doomsday scenario peculiarly technological, in that we have goaded nature enough that it now must turn against us with forces that shall dwarf us. Thus, the impending ecological disaster is the result of our inability to ask the proper questions about how we live, our hesitance to think piously, that is, with care, or love, and our failure to regain the rightful path of moral and virtuous action from which we have woefully strayed. Let us, then, begin with a question: Why have the structures of our well-being created varying circles of ecological Hell?

We often reason that since the disasters facing us are potentially global, then the proper solutions must come from global structures, such as governments and multinationals. But such reasoning is inadequate. The answers are not to be found in the hazy otherness of

corporate and political structures, which we are all-too-quick to imbue with qualities that we ourselves possess and daily practice: greed, materialism, rampant and blind consumerism. Who is it that is ultimately responsible for governments? Who is it that makes multinationals rich? We must be pious to thought, which is the quest for truth, and therefore we must question, even unflinchingly. Indeed, why must governments and industry change when we will not?

Democritus of Abdera, an early Greek philosopher of the fifth century BC says in one of his fragments: "Many whose actions are the most disgraceful, speak the most eloquent utterances." (Diels & Kranz, 1964, 2: B-52a). How graceful and passionate are our utterances about the need for action; how we love to rail against the inaction of our governments; how vociferous and convincing are our sentiments about protecting the environment – of saving the earth itself. But what of our actions? Are they honourable, or disgraceful? Who is responsible for the smog-days, the melting ice-caps, and the child-laborer whose little hands are best suited to assemble the smallest components in the gadgets we cannot live without? Why must we live in ostentatious monster homes, the cement needed for just one of which releases five tons of carbon into the air? Why are we quickly putting some of our best farmland under tarmac? How eloquent are our objections. What of our actions?

## II

The Western habit of questioning has a distinct and clear history and may be traced back to the end of the seventh century BC, to the Aegean island of Samos, or perhaps a little eastward on the mainland, to the city of Miletus, in present-day Turkey; it was in one or the other place that the earliest known Greek philosopher flourished; his name was Anaximander. Aside from various later references to what he said, nothing of his work has come down to us, except for three brief fragments, one of which is useful to us as college educators, and may be translated in this way: "Now, the source from which existing things derive their existence is also that to which they return at their destruction, according to necessity; for they give justice and make reparation to one another for their injustice, according to the unyielding laws of time" (Diels & Kranz, 1964, 12: B-1).<sup>1</sup>

There can be no more eloquent statement of humankind's responsibilities and obligations than this brief fragment, by a nearly unknown Greek philosopher. It speaks first of natural necessity; second, of justice and injustice – and third, of making reparation. Life depends on life, this fragment records for the first time in Western thought: all things are connected; there can be no gain without payment; and reparation must be made for that which is unduly taken, for injustice demands justice, "according to the laws of unyielding time." Too long, and too unthinkingly, have we taken from the Earth. With the words of Democritus before us, how discomfiting the truth of the old adage becomes: "Nothing in life is free." Is the earth now demanding reparation from us for the riches we have willfully

garnered, without a care for the natural costs? How many injustices have we all committed in order to be happy by the possession of things?

Where have we strayed to?

### III

The link between happiness and possession is first observed by Descartes, in his famous dictum: *Cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am. In this summative phrase Descartes, finally and irrevocably, links individual will to being and living in the material world.<sup>2</sup> But why have we misunderstood our being as possession, and therefore exploitation? Why have we chosen to reread Descartes as: *Emptio ergo sum*, I buy, therefore I am? Is being, living the same as possession? Is purchasing the same as having? Where have we strayed to?

We have come to equate our happiness with our potentially limitless ability to buy goods, to possess objects that we cannot (and perhaps should not) really need – regardless of the cost; as long as we can possess them. How eloquent our utterances, how elegant our arguments to save the Earth, and yet how disgraceful our actions. We demand things, which industry hastens to provide, at the best possible price. It is we who choose governments that prefer to do nothing – but which, like us, utter yet more eloquent phrases and sincere sentiments. Here, we might bring to mind the root meaning of the word, “sincere,” which in Latin means, “without wax,” because it was the habit of Roman merchants to repair, nearly invisibly, cracks in statues with melted wax, before they were sold as undamaged, or perfect pieces. Are our politicians, our industry, we ourselves – truly “sincere,” that is, without wax? Needless to say, no political decree will eliminate smog, or clean up our lakes and rivers. And why should industry change, when we will not? Therefore, let us reconsider Descartes’ maxim, which is about two processes: thinking and being.

We must think to live, because our individual actions are not without cost, are not harmless. Our will to buy has brought us, or bought us, to the very brink of ecological disaster. We must stop buying the way we do, stop living the way we do, stop demanding the things we do, which are produced at great natural and social costs – it is only when we learn to abandon the equation of happiness with consumption and possession of material goods – only then will we find again the rightful path of living with nature in that clichéd, yet truthful way – in harmony.

How are we, then, to proceed? It is always easier to posit problems; harder to find answers. Again, we may allow Heidegger to be our fingerpost. In another essay entitled, *Letter on Humanism*, he speaks about language and tells us that human beings are guests in the house of language (Heidegger, 1949, p. 271). For our purposes, we may reformulate this concept as: “Humankind is only a guest in the

house of nature.”

And how is a guest to live in the house of his or her host? With care, with dignity, with respect, and with love. Any other way is selfish and destructive. Let us also reconsider Heidegger’s earlier principle, “Questioning is the piety of thought.” Let us understand it to mean: “Caring is the piety of happiness.” And, at once, questions about morality and virtue arise.

Morality is that system which functions on the principle that harm, or evil, which inhibits and negates life, must be diminished and perhaps ultimately defeated; and virtue is that force of will which seeks the implementation of morality, as we have defined it. In the context of our discussion, then, happiness becomes the care of ourselves, which must rightly be extended to include the care of others – and wider still, the care of our host’s house, that is, the earth.

Boethius, the genius of the sixth century AD, whose thought serves as the hinge which binds Greek thought to our modern world, says in his famous little book, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, “What nature has made simple and indivisible, human error has divided and changed from true and perfect to false and imperfect.”<sup>3</sup>

Where have we strayed to? We have taken the perfection of nature and marred it. We have taken the richness of nature and squandered it. We have taken the purity of nature and polluted it. We have taken the balance of nature and ruined it. We have taken the beauty of nature and sullied it.

“They give justice and make reparation to one another for their injustice, according to the unyielding laws of time,” Anaximander said a long time ago; everything does indeed come at a price. Is nature now demanding reparation from us? There are certain truths that cannot change. And the time has come to ask hard questions – not of others, but of ourselves; politicians and industrialists are no more than projections of our wishes and our desires to consume in complete freedom. The ecological disaster that we are facing is the result of the way we have lived and continue to live. The old saying, *Caveat emptor*, buyer beware, therefore, now takes on a new and sinister meaning.

#### IV

I have been referring to Martin Heidegger’s essay not only because it contains statements that are usefully quotable and therefore quickly manipulated to make a point – but more importantly *The Question Concerning Technology* may be summarized in a way useful for our purposes: The very essence of technology, says Heidegger, (aside from progress) is that it contains within it the growth of that which will save us. To underscore this message, he brings us the words of the German poet Hölderlin: “But where danger is, deliverance also grows.”<sup>4</sup> And these words lead us to the words of

another poet, R.S. Thomas (1993, p. 298); in a poem entitled “Gone” we read:

There was a flower blowing  
and a hand plucked it.  
There was a stream flowing  
and a body besmirched it.  
There was a pure mirror  
of water and a face came  
And looked in it. There were words  
and wars and treaties, and feet trampled  
the earth and the wheels  
seared it; and an explosion  
followed. There was dust  
and silence; and out of the dust  
a plant grew, and the dew formed  
upon it; and a stream seeped  
from the dew to construct  
a mirror, and the mirror was empty.

## V

All is not lost; all is not hopeless and bleak – not if we are willing to change ourselves, one person at a time. And that change depends on the shattering of the dictum we have blindly chosen to live by – *emptio ergo sum*, “I buy, therefore I am.” The Earth will not sustain us if we continue living the way we have been; in its own way, it will shrug us off, and start anew, as Thomas’s poem suggests. But if we live as respectful guests, if we place care as the source of our happiness, we shall become worthy guests in the beautiful and wondrous house of nature.

True change is never sudden; it is slow. We must stop looking for vast and swift revolutions, which can be neither controlled nor managed. Rather, let us begin one person at a time; let us think ourselves into being. Let us begin to make reparation, to treat the earth with justice. Let us look to achieve ecological justice, so that we may win social justice. Let us abandon eloquent utterances and let us do honorable deeds. In this way, we will come to nurture and foster true happiness – which will be focused not upon things, but upon care – of ourselves, of others, of the earth. By changing ourselves, we will change the world – but that change must first begin with each of us – and only when we become worthy and respectful guests in the house of nature. Let us learn to live by a new maxim, an ecological one: *Caro ergo sum* – I care, therefore I am, because caring is the piety of our happiness.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The fragment is notoriously difficult to translate, given the fact that the relative pronouns are plural, which makes the understanding of Anaximander’s notion of ἀπειρον problematic. Famously, Nietzsche

translated this fragment in his *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, which was published in 1873.

<sup>2</sup> This rather famous dictum occurs in section 7 of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, and is the Latin version of his earlier statement, *je pense, donc je suis*, which is found in the *Discourse on Method*. We must also bear in mind St. Augustine's anticipation of Descartes in *The City of God* (Book XI, 26): *si fallor, sum*.

<sup>3</sup> "Quod enim simplex est indiuisumque natura, id error humanus separat et a uero atque perfecto ad falsum imperfectumque traducit." See Ludwig Bieler, *Boethii philosophiae Consolatio* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1957): III, Prosa 9.

<sup>4</sup> "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst/ Das Rettende auch." This is from Hölderlin's poem, "Patmos." See Christopher Middleton (trans.), *Friedrich Hölderlin. Eduard Mörike. Selected Poems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 74.

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