

Trumpeter (1990)

ISSN: 0832-6193

FOR THE RECORD: ON THE ORIGIN OF ECO-PHILOSOPHY

Henryk Skolimowski
University of Michigan

Henryk Skolimowski teaches philosophy in the Dept. of Humanities, College of Engineering, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48109. He is the author of *Ecophilosophy: Designing New Tactics for Living*, Ideas in Progress Series, Marion Boyers, Salem, N.H., 1981, and *The Theatre of the Mind: Evolution in the Sensitive Cosmos*, Quest Books, Wheaton, Ill., 1984. He has written numerous articles and monographs on technology and environmental philosophy, as well as a booklet on ecotheology. He also leads workshops and seminars in ecoyoga and reverential thinking and publishes a newsletter on ecophilosophy, which comes out irregularly. As mentioned in the text of his article, the section on "Ecological Humanism" was published earlier in the AA Notes No. 38, June-July 1974, pp.1-2, which is a publication of the Architectural Association of England, 34/36 Bedford Square, London. Reprinted here with permission of AA Notes.

1.Introduction

Philosophy is a mirror in which deep structures of a given society and culture are reflected. It is also a mirror in which the cracks of these deep structures are reflected.

The poet Shelley, writes: "Poets are the gigantic mirrors in which futurity casts its shadow over the present." Sometimes, philosophy acts in this capacity as well; it attempts to be a mirror in which the future shapes of a given culture are captured- -if only dimly.

Eco-philosophy broadly conceived, as including Arne Naess' Ecosophy, The Deep Ecology Movement, New Christian Ecotheology, Ecology, Social Ecology and Eco-Feminism, attempts to assume upon itself the role which Shelley ascribes to poets. We are trying to grasp the shape of the emerging world and express it in Philosophical terms. Moreover, we are trying to influence this shape by postulating what it ought to be. As such, our role is visionary and normative. In every society there must be people who are looking forward to the future with foresight and clarity.

During the last fifteen years, and especially during the last five years, Eco-philosophy has flourished — if a bit erratically. When a new growth emerges, it sometimes shoots forth uncontrollably. And so it has happened with various branches of Eco- philosophy. Its exuberance has been a sign of its healthy growth. However, we (by "we" I mean Eco-philosophers) are not only biological beings, prompted and determined by the vital forces residing in us, we are supposed to be reflective. We are supposed to be aware of the nature of our activity.

What has disturbed me, while watching the Eco-philosophic scene, is the fact that while we urge deeper understanding and compassion, we often do not exhibit this compassion with regard to each other. So, instead of consideration and reverence, one quite often sees competition and cutting up of opponents — because they allegedly disagree with some of our cherished tenets. As I have said before: What unites us is much more important than what divides us.

What unites us, first of all, is care and concern for the preservation and well-being of the whole planet, with all of its creatures. This is what I call the Ecological Imperative. We all share this imperative. And it should be a uniting force, guiding our action and reflection. In unity is our strength. In unity we can help each other to develop a coherent and comprehensive philosophy which can be a foundation for a new civilization. We are far from completing such a philosophy. For the moment there are only some promising fragments.

2.The Inception of My Eco-Philosophy

In this paper I shall put on record the development of my own Eco-Philosophy, as it will celebrate the 15th anniversary of its inception in 1989. The first outline of my Eco-Philosophy was sketched in the following circumstances. I was invited by the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London to participate in a symposium entitled, "Beyond Alternative Technology." We were convinced, already at this time, that the Ecology Movement had somehow burned itself out. Building windmills and insisting on soft technology was not enough. So four of us took the floor to ask ourselves, "Where do we go from here?" Each of us had exactly ten minutes to deliver his message. Instead of analyzing the shortcomings of the Ecology movement, I decided to make a leap forward and ask myself, "What is most troubling in the foundations of our knowledge, and what other foundation should be assumed so that it can carry the edifice of new thinking and a new society?" The sketch which I delivered was entitled Ecological Humanism. In it, the major ideas that became the backbone of my Eco-Philosophy were formulated. It happens rarely that one is aware of the exact point of a new departure. It was perhaps a coincidence that the Architectural Association immediately published my text. And it was by a fluke of a chance that I kept one copy. So I am going to share the text of this copy with the reader as part of this account of the development of Eco-Philosophy. The text of this talk is the next section.

3.Ecological Humanism: An Answer to 'Where do we go from here?'

Oswald Spengler has written that 'Technics are the tactics for living.' This is a very useful phrase. I shall take advantage of it, while stating our dilemma and

searching for possible solutions.

Modern technology, or better — Western technology, has failed us not because it has become ecologically devastating, but mainly because it has forgotten its basic function, namely that all technics are, in the last resort, the tactics for living. Because modern technology has failed us as a set of the tactics for living, it has also proved in the process to be economically counter-productive and ecologically ruinous.

But this indictment also affects Alternative Technology. Alternative Technology has started rather vigorously, captured the imagination of many, and is now fizzling out. Why? Because Alternative Technology has not taken itself seriously enough, that is, as a new set of tactics for living.

When pushed to an extreme, Alternative Technology has either become an idolatry of new kinds of gadgets, or else a crass ideology of the New Left: a feverish process perpetuating itself, though perhaps empty of content. Alternative Technology has been waning (though the Establishment has just discovered it: see the article in the Observer, 26 May 1974) because it did not go to its roots; it did not confront itself with the ultimate task of all technics: to become a set of tactics for living.

Tactics for living are not merely new uses of old instruments. Culture is a fundamental part of the tactics for living. Thriving and healthy, culture provides a set of dynamic structures for living. Within the Western world, particularly during the last 150 years, and especially during the last 50 years, culture (as well as religion) has been systematically misunderstood, mystified, misread and distorted, and taken either to be a sickly product of decadent minds, or an anachronism of the pre-technological era. In either case, culture was considered more or less spurious. But culture and religion are an inherent part of the human strategies for survival and well being. However, the culture of the post-industrial era cannot be a simple resuscitation of some traditional cultures, for it will have to meet new contingencies of life, which means it will have to rethink the products of the human mind and spirit within a differently conceived world.

I have chosen to call this new set of tactics for living, which encompasses New Technology, New Culture and New Ideology, Ecological Humanism. Ecological Humanism is not a new label for old things, nor simply pouring old wine into new bottles. I must point out, in particular, that Ecological Humanism has little to do with traditional humanism; and it quite sharply separates itself from Marxist or Socialist humanism, which calls (along with other humanism) for the appropriation of Nature to man.

Traditional humanism has emphasised the nobility of the human being, the independence of humans, indeed the greatness of humans who are cut in the Protean mould. This conception of humanity went hand in hand with the idea of appropriating Nature to the ends and needs of humans. Marx fully accepted

this conception of humanity and the idea of the appropriation of Nature (or simply using Nature) to human advantage, or, indeed, to human content.

Ecological Humanism is based on the reversed premise. It calls for the appropriation of humans to Nature. We have to see the human as a part of a larger scheme of things: of Nature and Cosmos. We have to transcend and abolish the idea of the Protean (and Faustian) human. The consequences of this reversal are quite far reaching, and I will just touch on some of them. On a more practical level, Ecological Humanism signifies, among other things, frugality, recycling, the reverence for Nature, which are really three different aspects of the same thing.

I must emphasise that Ecological Humanism is not just another fancy name for saying that we should be less wasteful, for it signifies a fundamental reorientation of the multitude of things. Not many people, Marxists in particular, are aware that traditional humanism, as based on the ideal of the Protean human and the idea of the appropriation of Nature (with the tacit acceptance of both present science and present technology) are simply incompatible with the ideal of harmony between the human species and the rest of Nature.

Now, let me spell out some of the consequences of Ecological Humanism. On the practical level, as I have already mentioned, Ecological Humanism spells out a new kind of technology based on the idea of frugality, recycling, the reverence for Nature. A new economy, of which the reverence for nature is not a spurious ornament, but an intrinsic part of a new design.

On the level of the individual, Ecological Humanism signifies inner exuberance instead of the restless outward activity; empathy and compassion rather than ruthless competition; understanding in depth rather than merely handling of information.

On the level of the entire culture, Ecological Humanism signifies a fundamental switch from the traditional idiom, in which humans assert themselves against things 'out there', and try to impress themselves on the world, to the idiom, in which humans will mesh themselves with the things 'out there'.

It is by now clear to you, I hope, that no New Technology can provide a solution by itself, that no new Culture can provide a solution by itself, that no New Ideology can provide an answer by itself, but that each must become an aspect of a larger paradigm, an aspect, in other words, of a new set of tactics for living.

In the realm of ideology, Ecological Humanism points towards social relationships based on the idea of sharing, and stewardship, rather than owning things and fighting continuous ruthless battles in open and camouflaged social wars.

In short, Ecological Humanism is based on a new articulation of the world at large:

- it sees the world not as a place for pillage and plunder, an arena for gladiators, but as a sanctuary in which we temporarily dwell, and of which we must take the utmost care;
- it sees humans not as acquirers and conquistadors, but as guardians and stewards;
- it sees knowledge not as an instrument for the domination of Nature, but ultimately as techniques for the refinement of the soul;
- it sees values not in pecuniary equivalents, but in intrinsic terms as a vehicle which contributes to a deeper understanding of people by people, and a deeper cohesion between people and the rest of creation;
- and it sees all these above mentioned elements as a part of the new tactics for living.

"A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"
(Browning).

This text led to a monograph, also entitled *Ecological Humanism*, published by Gryphon Press in England in 1977. This monograph foreshadows major ideas of the book, *The Arrogance of Humanism*, by David Ehrenfeld, published in 1978.

The ideas of this monograph were further developed and published as a book, *Eco-Philosophy: Designing New Tactics for Living*, 1981; as well as other publications such as: *Ecological Man*, 1981, "Power — Reality and Illusions, A Philosophical Analysis," (in *Alternatives: A Journal of World Policy*, March 1983) and *Eco-Theology: Toward a Religion for Our Times*, 1985.

From the start, it was clear to me that a philosophical reconstruction which attempts to provide a new philosophical foundation for our civilization, and which aims at the creation of a new philosophy, must simultaneously address itself to the structure of reality (thus must create a new metaphysics, or a new Cosmology), to the phenomenon of humanity and to the problem of values. Against the mechanistic world view, or cosmology, we must create a new conception of reality, a new cosmology. An appropriate name for this cosmology is, of course, *Eco-Cosmology*. *Eco-Cosmology* must attempt to redefine the structure of the Cosmos in new terms. From this overall structure it must clearly follow that a symbiotic, cooperative, just and equitable structure of the human world is not an aberration, but a natural consequence. (Which we postulate in our *Eco-Philosophies*, if only indirectly; by insisting on species & human egalitarianism.)

I have already sketched some of the tenets of this alternative cosmology in my book, *Eco-Philosophy*, and more recently in the paper entitled, "Eco-Cosmology as the Foundation of the New Cultural Reconstruction." Thomas Berry has

actually addressed this cosmological question very well and extensively in his various writings. Quite rightly, he insists that ours is not only an environmental crisis, is not only a religious crisis, but above all, a cosmological crisis. The old cosmologies, conceived under the auspices of traditional religions and traditional philosophies, are clearly insufficient and act as straightjackets, impinging on the very ways in which we think about the world.

The importance of the cosmological dimension is by and large not sufficiently appreciated by various schools of Eco-Philosophy, and certainly not sufficiently addressed in their writings. Deep Ecology, Social Ecology and Eco-Feminism are certainly lacking in this respect. I should mention, however that there is a dim outline of a new cosmology in some new writings of Eco-Feminism, as they attempt to reconstruct our world view by restructuring our reality in the image and characteristics of the goddess, with her female, inclusive, compassionate and cooperative qualities. But this dim outline is not yet a cosmology. There is a sort of implied cosmology in the writings of Deep Ecology philosophers. But this is only implied, not spelled out.

As to Murray Bookchin's cosmology, as expressed in his Social Ecology, the situation is perhaps even less satisfactory. He is a staunch believer in secularism. And he is also a staunch believer in science and technology, which are (for him) the main forces of change and social amelioration. In accepting secularism, science and technology (with all their blessings), indirectly Bookchin accepts the mixed bag of our rational, scientific, technological civilization. Thus, what is left lurking behind Bookchin's writings are some of the main elements of the old-fashioned mechanistic cosmology, which by its consequences has wrought so much damage to the natural and the human world.

4.Philosophy of the Human and Eco-Ethics

Another dimension of a viable Eco-Philosophy must be a new concept of the human. Again, Thomas Berry addresses this question excellently, when he insists that we must re-invent the human on the species level. In my own writing, I propose the idea of Ecological Human (Ecological Person would be a more adequate form of expression) in contrast to the Faustian Man, the Technological Man, the Homo Faber, and also in contrast to the Rational Man.

Ecological Person is the creature of evolution. It emerges at a certain juncture of human evolution and will disappear at another juncture, when evolution (through us) will transcend itself further. Ecological Person recognizes the redeeming and necessary nature of suffering, of compassion, of love of wisdom. Ecological Person envisages the human condition as defined by at least the four above-mentioned components. In my monograph on Ecological Man, I analyze these components in some depth.

Perhaps what needs to be emphasised in our times is the importance of wisdom, and especially ecological wisdom or ecosophy. Wisdom is not the possession of a set of permanent principles, and therefore not to be found in the Upanishads, the Bible, the Bhagavad-gita, the Koran or in Dante's Divine Comedy. Wisdom is the possession of right knowledge for a given state of the world, for given conditions of society, for given articulation of the human condition. Insofar as the state of the world changes, insofar as the conditions of society change, insofar as the articulation of knowledge goes on, insofar, therefore as the articulation of the human being proceeds, insofar as the human mind and human sensitivities become refined, we cannot embrace one structure of wisdom for all times, but we must seek a different structure, a different form of balance appropriate for a given different time.

Wisdom is therefore an historical category, not a set of permanent forms, but a set of dynamic structures; always to be re-built, restructured, re-adjusted, re-articulated. Evolutionary wisdom is understanding how the human condition changes through centuries, millennia, eons of time. Only such a conception of wisdom can aid the race in its evolutionary voyage. ¹ The concept of the Ecological Person is not sufficiently addressed in the literature of either Deep Ecology or Social Ecology. Nor is the importance of Ecological Wisdom sufficiently recognized and incorporated into thinking of the majority of Eco-Philosophers.

Another question which is not sufficiently discussed, or at any rate not in sufficient depth is the problem of ethics. Ecological values, as distinct from traditional values and from mere environmental values, must be clearly spelled out and related to the concept of The Ecological Person and to the grounding philosophy of Eco-Cosmology. The problem of values is clearly a difficult one for Ecological Philosophers. They do not want to opt for situational ethics and especially for Relativism, for then (if values are left to the subjective determination of individuals) those who want to exploit and plunder natural habitats are given a license to do so. On the other hand, Eco-Philosophers, and especially Social Ecologists, are leery of accepting any absolute or objective values, for this smacks of old-fashioned religion. So usually they hedge and opt for some kind of environmental/instrumental values: We must preserve environments because, in the long run, they feed us. This clearly is not a satisfactory philosophical eco-ethics.

I have addressed myself to this problem before ² and, since it is important, I will address myself to it again. If we wish to build Eco-Ethics as an integral part of the Ecological world view, we need to accept some core of intrinsic values. If we consider the planet as sacred, as of intrinsic value, if we consider other species as equal to humans (and if we consider humans as sacred, as being of intrinsic value), then a reverence for life in all of its manifestations, must emerge as an intrinsic value of Eco-Ethics.

Intrinsic values need not be defined as absolute or objective. They are, however, universal for the species at a given time — given our present constraints and

our present imperatives of survival and the desire for meaningful life. I wish to take issue with the claims of Baird Callicot, and others, who assume that the formulation "x is intrinsically valuable" is meant to be an ontological claim about x, that is to say, is taken to be a claim about the essential nature of being x, a fact about x independent of our valuing consciousness. This, in my view, is a mistake, for it leads to Platonism, to seeking some absolute forms (in some absolute reality) which underlie our values. Values do not reside in objects, but in our consciousness. For this reason, they cannot be justified by reference to objects, but by reference to human consciousness. Let me emphasize, value claims are not ontological but axiological claims. Thus, their justification is not physical, physicalist, or ontological, it is phenomenological. It is grounded in our axiological consciousness.

Let me explain this point, as it is of considerable importance for the entire moral debate of our times. I think that since G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, of 1903, we have been on a mistaken course in philosophy. Or rather, we have pursued the analytical path as if it were the ethical one.

As we know, Moore was an astute thinker, particularly clever in identifying various forms of fallacies in moral argument. Yet from our perspective of time, it appears that his entire moral philosophy is based on the fallacy of confusing moral insight with linguistic insight. Analytical philosophy since Moore has been trapped by this fallacy. We have (naively) assumed that analytical scrutiny of moral concepts will by itself lead to right morality. but morality and analysis are two different things.

Let us take a simple example. If I tell a small child or a simple uneducated person "Don't kill," he may ask "Why?" I then respond: "Because every being has a right to live." And he will understand. Not because he understands my analysis. But because he understands the nature of my moral insight. We have, each of us, the moral sense within. When this moral sense is activated by a principle which touches the core of our brotherhood with other beings, or illuminaes for us the idea of justice, then the moral insight follows. This happens at an early age, and also in so called 'primitive' minds. On the other hand, a sophisticated analytical scrutiny of basic moral concepts by a brilliant logical mind may result in no moral insight whatsoever, particularly when the mind is insensitive, eaten by scepticism and nihilism. Therefore, the two things are quite distinct, moral insight and analytical insight. This is particularly apparent in our times. We are absolutely overloaded with the analytical scrutiny of moral concepts, and we don't have any moral guides to live by — particularly the young people.

Ethics, as a part of human cultures, emerged exactly at the point when the moral insight was accepted by the early man as a part of the defining characteristic of the human person. Ethical insight is in the domain of axiological consciousness. We are so made that certain things are right and other things are wrong — for us as ethical agents, and this is regardless of the analytical difficulties we might have in defining the terms 'right' and 'wrong'; these difficulties are more

apparent for philosophers than for so-called 'unsophisticated' people. Let me emphasize, unless we accept the idea of axiological consciousness, as the valuing consciousness, we cannot succeed with any analytical scrutiny of moral concepts. The existence of the axiological consciousness is presupposed by the analytical scrutiny of 'right' and 'wrong.' Axiological consciousness precedes analytical consciousness. No human consciousness, no values — intrinsic or otherwise.

The position which asserts that values reside in human consciousness is also a position which asserts that there are no intrinsic values beyond our consciousness — as a species of a certain kind and independent of it. Let us be mindful that this is not an expression of subjectivism. Our intrinsic values are species-specific. In this very sense, they are inter-subjective or trans-subjective. Indeed, being species-specific they cannot be personal or subjective. But they do not need to be declared as objective or absolute — unless we are Platonists or adherents to the religious world view, within which values of good and evil are established by God and the Scriptures.

Let me emphasize, it is possible and justifiable to define Ecological values as intrinsic, without falling into the pitfalls of either absolutism or subjectivism. Our axiological consciousness, which is species-specific, therefore trans-subjective, is a guarantor of the intrinsic character of our values, and in a sense of the universality of these values. This universality is limited to a given species.

In a coherent, well-developed Eco-Philosophy, these three elements, cosmology — concept of humanity — values, are all aspects of each other. We need to develop a system of values and a concept of the human which coherently fit the image of the reverential universe in which we act in a participatory manner.

Perhaps I am suggesting too neat a structure. Perhaps the world view of the future will be much looser in character, and more arbitrary. But if we allow too much arbitrariness and relativism- -all is lost: the greedy, the unreflective and the unenlightened man will then argue that his slothful, consumptive ways are as good as frugal and ecological ways, for all is arbitrary and all is relative. Therefore, the Ecological world view, which will spell out a coherent and viable foundation for the whole species cannot be a matter of arbitrariness. The cosmos itself, as well as eco-habitats, and the structure of our lives (if they are meaningful and coherent), signify specific and often exacting constraints. The recognition of these constraints is Ecological Wisdom. Building on these constraints is part of Ecological Grace and Ecological Exuberance.

The Green Tao is slowly emerging. Within the same week, at the end of September 1988, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher announced her conversion to environmentalism, and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze proposed, on the behalf of the Soviet Union, the creation of a World Ecological Council to act as a trustee for the global environment. Both these events are portentous omens. The Zeitgeist is perhaps beginning to speak through us all. As times goes on, many of us will be called on to advise groups of people and even gov-

ernments on environmental, ecological and ethical matters. We should be ready to serve, for the time of the ecological consciousness is emerging.

As a postscript I would propose that a conference be organized sometime in 1990 at which the representatives of the various schools of Eco-Philosophy can state and clarify their positions. Above all, in order to articulate the common platform which unites the various branches of Eco-Philosophy, Deep Ecology, Social Ecology, or whatever names you wish to apply to the new philosophy of our times, which provides the architecture for the Green Tao.

Notes

1.For further discussion see *Ecological Man*, and also H. Skolimowski, Chapter 7 of *Technology and Human Destiny*, University of Madras, 1983.

2.See especially: "In Defense of Eco-Philosophy and of Intrinsic Values," *The Trumpeter*, Vol. 3, No. 4, Fall 1986.

Citation Format

Skolimowski, Henryk (1990) FOR THE RECORD: ON THE ORIGIN OF ECO-PHILOSOPHY *Trumpeter*: 7, 1. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.7.1.13>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details