

The Arctic Dimension Outside and Inside Us

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The future of Arctic and Antarctic nature depends, to a certain degree, on the strengthening and spreading of the feeling and the view that it is a self-contained world with meaning in itself: it has its kind of perfection as it is; and that it should not be seen as a potential material resource for humankind; that we are intruders; that our contamination of the Arctic and Antarctic atmosphere is shameful, and the same applies to the interference with the composition of the stratosphere. The feeling of shame probably originates with the feeling that we have nothing to do in those far away areas: there is no good reason of interference.

The view that the polar areas are inhospitable and hostile is likely to disappear because of the development of proper equipment. There are “wonderful” possibilities of large scale tourism. Economic pressures may consequently be expected to increase. Resistance must be significantly increased. This implies wider recognition of the perils. How can we all contribute to that? The privilege simply *to be here* has a cost: we, who had never been here before, should in the years to come be willing to help those who already are trying to protect this part of the world.

Since the time of the European Renaissance, about 500 years ago, academic philosophy has shown waves of conformity or fashion. In my time we had an internationally felt wave of logical empiricism (also called logical positivism); the wave caused by the “early” Wittgenstein and that of the “late” Wittgenstein—one personally overwhelming; the so-called “philosophical world”; hermeneutics; and now the less reputable and sometimes squarely silly (self-proclaimed)

postmodernism. It is amusing to inspect this last fashion a little because it is so convenient to make some conventional philosophical point in contrast to what is said, or seems to be meant, in the literature called postmodern philosophical literature.

In that literature, authors use earnest expressions like “the social construction of reality” and “the social construction of nature,” so everything is social and interpretational. Texts are real, and especially texts about texts are taken seriously, but the way seems infinitely long before we reach what you and I naively worship as grand, majestic nature! In short, we have to do with a literary, and occasionally academic sophisticated “absolutizing” (*Absolutierung*) of social relations; every relation is a social relation, and we never get to a relation between a human being or a society and nature. Ecology seems, in the postmodern texts, to have *only* to do with human social systems and not ecosystems. In one word: “sociologism.” We have had in this century “psychologism” and “ecologism” (every science is part of ecology).

To meet here at Svalbard can, as already suggested, only be justified as an expression of resolve to contribute to the dissemination of views favourable to the preservation of a largely intact Arctic and Antarctic.

Concepts of wilderness play a prominent role in industrial states where there are still great areas with limited impact by humans: the United States, Canada, and Australia. From the point of view of conservation, four levels of abstention from intervention may be distinguished. At the first level, a limiting case, *all* sorts of interference by humans are to be avoided. This includes flying over the area. In second level, areas of wilderness, scientific exploration is permitted, as are attempts to counteract the influence of pollution and other phenomena due to non-human and human influence. Third level wilderness permits tourism, but limited and only during parts of the year. Fourth level areas are managed roughly as the great natural parks of the United States.

At the moment, one of the most noteworthy undertakings is to try to let there be corridors between areas of wilderness of such sort that inbreeding is avoided and there is free access for protected animals to move from one area to another.

The Arctic and Antarctic are by far the greatest wilderness areas left. Thanks to the enormity of the areas, and relative scarcity of intrusions, little has been done to seriously restrict interference with the

ecosystems. The accelerated rate of interference, if continued, will result in a totally unacceptable state of affairs in the next century.

As a philosopher I am expected to talk from a point of view of principles. This means for me, among other things, to contemplate a future much wider than in practical life, say, the development of life since Cambrian, 600 million years ago. It is quite natural to move from thousands years ago to thousands years from now into the future. The relevance of such a frame of reference along the time axis is evident when considering the growth of the human population.

There is a discussion going on as to what extent technological advance is a causal factor for the high rate of population growth, and to what extent the increasing population pressure in the last 500 years caused or motivated the technological advance. At any rate, the present technological knowledge is such that with one-tenth of the global population, the “Gaia Gift” per capita would be very much greater. By yearly Gaia Gift per capita, I mean the amount of interference in the ecosystems a person may cause without resulting in ecological unsustainability. Roughly, the Gaia Gift is inversely proportional to the world population. Assuming, say, that one among ten thousand people feel a persistent urge to visit or stay in the high Arctic or Antarctic once in a lifetime, with a population of a billion that means an urge among 100,000 to realize the dream, whereas with a population of 10 billion, it means that such an urge makes itself felt among one million.

Now, education plays a role, and with higher education one may expect that a higher fraction of the population will feel an urge to stay for a while in the Arctic or Antarctic. In any case, it is clear that the problem of protecting those regions increases with population and also with increases in the level of education. This makes it natural for us to support ethically acceptable plans to contribute to a decrease of the human population. These plans are rejected when people make the sharp distinction between plans to reduce the population of a non-human species and that of humans. The indignation when we talk about reduction of the human population stems, in part, from the habit of not thinking in terms of long time periods.

Ethically acceptable efforts to reduce the population, must, so far as I can see, envisage a process over many hundreds of years. Even if there is only a quarter of a per cent yearly reduction, a very substantial reduction will be realized in the long run. A problem is, however, that education favours both increasing possibilities of reduction and increasing urge to experience the high Arctic areas. Nevertheless, I find

it inevitable to dream of a future state of the planet with a much smaller human population and a corresponding satisfactory percentage of this population being acceptable as visitors to well-preserved Arctic and Antarctic regions. As it is now, it is evident that only a tiny percentage of those who have an urge to make such a visit can do so with unacceptable interference in the ecosystems and the life of the animals who live there.

What rules of ecotourism should be implemented? As far as I can judge they must be very strong rules and, considering the great difficulties in assessing conformity with the rules, a substantial percentage of the people in the regions will have to be supervisors of what is going on.

The qualification of a supervisor will require competence of various kinds, and their mentality, fundamental attitudes, and views are also relevant.

We shall evidently have to deal with the life philosophy of the supervisors or guides. The experience from other areas, for instance Africa, is that people can practically always bribe guides and then disturb and harass animals, collect rare plants, disturb the vegetation, and interfere in completely unacceptable ways. It seems to be necessary that guides or supervisors have a strong life philosophy that protects them from temptation. They must accept personal responsibility and integrate views in their personalities that make transgression of severe rules impossible. Such life philosophy is not very uncommon, but it is rarely formulated.

One symptom of such a life philosophy is the serious acceptance of the views characteristic of supporters of the deep ecology movement. Perhaps we may say that the attitudes of the supporters essentially feel and show deep respect for any life forms, whether seen as useful or not, beautiful or not, dangerous or not. The grounds or causes of this respect may differ, but seem to have to do with some kind of identification, finding that we have something in common, whether we are humans or not. What is also characteristic is that this respect is extended to cover landscapes, as if they were alive and having interests. The way they perceive the natural world is such that it spontaneously elicits an urge, in appropriate situations, to care.

Such a conviction leads naturally to instinctive displeasure, sometimes distress, and even horror at seeing a breach of respect. And they are able to act in favour of what they stand for, act within the limits their

positions permit, seeing that policies today in no country are fully compatible with the attitudes they have.

The firm basis of conviction is combined with a general principle of non-violence but persistence in communication with opponents, with people and institutions in favour of developments that are incompatible with more severe measures to preserve, or with people who proclaim indifference.

One cannot expect that people with an urge to experience the Arctic or Antarctic also have an urge to contribute to the change of policies. It is unfortunately more common that they tend to avoid publicity and exposure in social conflicts. It would be cruel to insist that they should participate in the “ugly” and complicated political conflicts that are inevitable in the years to come. But they should try to express clearly their sincere appreciation when people engaged in politics courageously favour radical kinds of protection of the Arctic and Antarctic. “Go on, we are right behind you. Come to dinner if you need food!” The institutions responsible for telling the public about what is going on, but should not go on, in the Arctic and Antarctic, do not perhaps have a sense of the importance of being “sellers.” They try to “sell” a message, but do not study seriously enough the means used by corporations trying to increase their sales. We need to increase the minority who are aware of the dangers ahead and who will gladly give a little of their time and energy to help.

I propose we discuss “ways and means” very seriously. What can we do this year? At our places of work? In our dealings with people and institutions? In our daily lives? What are the not too costly books and periodicals we need to disseminate? What is going on in schools? At universities?

But before leaving the philosophical arena, I shall try to make clearer why non-interference, leaving something completely alone, keeping away, may not mean to abandon. In the darkness in a cabin at night, in a small ship on a vast ocean, the ocean is not seen but is present in the mind, colouring its contents, adding a dimension, sometimes like an impressive background, sometimes like a reminder of our own limitations.

Man's history in the high Arctic is primarily a history of unlimited greed, brutality, and vandalism. When this is said three times over, we may add: a story of courage and perseverance.

Hunting lacked ethical rules, the pleasures of greed and taste of wallowing in resources resulted in mass slaughter completely beyond what possibly could have any meaning or function.

What I say here does not express a judgement by urbanized people who have never hunted and never lived under harsh climatic conditions. It is a judgement by people today who have lived for a long time in the high Arctic and who very well know the strain and hardships. On the contrary, the term “glaring” or “screaming” arrogance is used on page 142 in the important book *Hvit Villmark* by Robin Buzza.¹ But he adds that this kind of arrogance “flourishing in the great area of whaling and hunting” was not considered unbecoming in “the centuries of European expansion.” What is less understandable to me is the following grotesque phenomenon: Long articles about the great area of whaling find their way to newspapers describing every aspect except the slow death of whales being tortured by irons in their flesh, dragging boats along until they had no more strength but still with intact nerves for pain. The vandals were able more or less to destroy many habitats of mussels and fish.² It is something of an irony; we are right in being afraid of exponential or explosive population growth. Under certain circumstances, a few hundred humans degrade living conditions more than a hundred thousand would do under what we today call normal conditions.

Notes

¹Robin Buzza, *Hvit villmark: om en ferd i Svalbards natur og menneskets sinn*. Oslo: Grøndahl Dreyer (1994).

² Buzza, 143.