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Beyond Modernity and Tradition: towards a Third Way for Development

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The basic idea of the paper is that:

- how we understand the world (our metaphysical premise) determines, to a large degree, how we treat it.
- How we treat our world constitutes our basic modality
- Our basic modality colours everything we do – our entire culture is informed with it.

The idea is that there are basic assumptions about the nature of the world that underlie all cultures, and that the form that a given culture takes – particularly in respect of its relation to its natural environment – reflects these basic assumptions.

Three broad types of society may be identified in terms of their metaphysical premise or underlying view of the world:

Modern

Traditional

“Third Way” – beyond modernity and tradition

1) Modernity

Before identifying the metaphysical premise of modern societies, let’s consider the operating assumptions that underlie such societies, as these are reflected in the modern project of *development*.

The assumptions underlying the project of development (urban development, industrial development, social development) are as follows:

- (i) it is possible for us, as humans, to take control of our own fate
- (ii) we can do this by taking control of the physical world – the world of “nature”
- (iii) we take control of the physical world by understanding the physical mechanisms of nature (via science). Understanding these mechanisms enables us to create techniques and technologies that promote human ends
- (iv) in this way we can re-make the world to suit our own purposes
- (v) there is no conclusion to this process – we must keep increasing our knowledge of the physical mechanisms of nature in order to keep improving conditions for humanity (→ progress)
- (vi) perpetual change is thus built into the idea of modernity – perpetual “improvement”. Modernity consists in the striving to escape the past (the old) and transcend the present (what exists now – “the given”) in favour of the new, the future.

This set of assumptions, built into the idea of development, seems acceptable and normal only on account the deeper, metaphysical assumption on which it rests. This is

the assumption that the world is devoid of an inner life of its own – an inner purpose or subjectivity or conativity. (Conativity is the will of a system to maintain or increase its own existence.) Without such an inner principle, the world does not exist for itself – it does not matter to itself. It therefore doesn't matter to it that we want to re-make it according to our specifications. Understood in this way, as without an inner principle, without conativity, the world cannot be regarded as morally considerable.

This is the worldview of materialism. Materialism underlies science and the whole project of modernity. Without this underlying assumption, the project of development would not be morally defensible.

The basic existential modality of materialist societies – their basic way of being in the world - is instrumental: this involves humanity taking control of things with a view to remaking the world in accordance with human desire.

Environmental management in modern societies is built on the same basic assumptions as is the project of development. The environmental manager takes control of the natural environment so that nature can continue to provide life support for humanity. In other words, the environmental manager looks after the life system as a resource for humanity. This reflects the materialist assumption that nature is basically a mechanical system with no meaningful ends or purposes or conativity of its own. True, these anthropocentric ends of the environmental manager are sometimes supplemented by a degree of concern for living systems or nonhuman species in their own right. These systems or species may be accorded "existence values" in addition to the long list of utility values they have for us. But existence values are usually poorly integrated with utility values, and the far-reaching implications of taking existence values seriously are not followed through. So the environmental manager is normally still operating on the assumption that humanity can and should take control of the world and re-make it to serve human purposes.

Both developers and environmental managers then follow the basic modality of modernity and subscribe to its materialist assumptions.

Modern societies may accordingly be characterized as materialist societies.

2) **Tradition**

The condition of modernity may be contrasted with that of tradition. The most striking point of contrast between modernity and tradition lies in their respective attitudes to change. Where modernity is addicted to change, continually seeking to escape the past and transcend the present in favour of the new, tradition seeks to restrict change to what is allowable in terms of the cultural structures and dictates of the past. It seeks to take care of, conserve, what has come down to the present from the past.

This conservatism characteristic of traditional societies derives from the metaphysical premise of such societies, which is typically religious, in the sense that it sees the world as under the sway of supernatural entities, such as gods or spirits or occult principles. Religious authorities are established in society to mediate between humanity and the supernatural realm. These authorities create particular cultural structures and practices, and these structures and practices become sanctified by their

association with religious function. Because they are sanctified in this way, they cannot be changed. The “sanctity” of tradition, and hence its conservatism, is thus held in place by its underlying religious worldview/metaphysical presupposition.

The metaphysical presupposition of pre-modern or traditional societies is thus pre-materialist, so such societies may themselves be characterized as pre-materialist.

The basic existential modality of pre-materialist (state) societies then – the basic orientation of pre-materialist peoples to their world – is one of gratitude for the given and conservation thereof, together with a dependence upon assistance from supernatural sources.

The conservatism of traditional societies means that traditional societies often succumb to a degree of stasis and therefore lack the creative resources to meet *unprecedented* challenges - such as those arising from globalization and the environmental crisis. (This is the trouble with tradition: it is fundamentally nonadaptive.)

3) **Third Way**

Is there then a “third way” for society that partakes neither of the modern addiction to change, with its crude instrumentalism and anthropocentrism, nor of the stasis of tradition?

Ecological philosophers have tried to suggest alternatives to modernity. Against the materialism of modernity they have asserted that life systems have ends of their own – they exist for themselves as well as for us and are therefore morally considerable. Ecophilosophers have represented humanity as part of ecology and human ends as being properly enfolded within the ecological ends of the greater life system. This ecophilosophical response to the presuppositions of modernity entails a conservative modality, both in the positive sense – it seeks to take care of things – but also in the negative sense – it tries to restrict change to whatever falls within the existing capacities of ecosystems.

Ecological philosophers might thus be seen as “nature traditionalists”, seeking to keep the world within the parameters of nature-as-it-presently-is, where nature-as-it-presently-is has acquired, for them, a sanctified status (almost amounting to a religious status, in some cases). It is on account of this sanctified status that ecophilosophers resist changes that exceed the capability of nature-as-it-presently-is.

In other words, ecophilosophy, in its response to modernity, may have fallen back into the conservatism, and hence the stasis, of a new kind of traditionalism and may for that reason not constitute a “third way”.

Is there then a “way” of *change*, a modality that *protects the given*, but which also allows for *creativity*?

Let’s consider the modality of *synergy*. (Something approximating to synergy is implicit in a lot of sustainability practice, so I see this work on synergy as representing an articulation of a philosophy of sustainability.)

What is synergy?

Synergy may be defined as a form of relationship between two or more parties who engage with each other in such a way that something new and larger than either of them, but true to the inner principles of each, is created.

In synergy we engage with the world in such a way that it spontaneously adapts and enlarges its ends in response to our encounter with it. This adaptation or enlargement occurs *with* the grain or flow of its conativity and is, in that sense, a further elaboration of that conativity. Yet this new end is not one towards which the world would have moved had we not engaged with it. By way of synergy we do change the course of events, but in doing so we do not destroy or disrupt the integrity of the given. Instead synergy draws out the conative potentials of the given. It is important to note that in any instance of synergy between ourselves and the world, our own ends are transformed and enlarged just as those of the world are.

Everyday examples of synergy include the kinds of improvisation in music or dance that involve partners moving or playing in subtle and spontaneous response to one another, so that patterns of music or dance are created that are entirely new but nevertheless expressive of the performative “signatures” of each of the participants.

Clearly synergy in this sense presupposes that the parties to the synergistic engagement have ends of their own – it presupposes that they are conative beings or systems with ways of unfolding that express that inner principle.

If synergy is proposed as a basic modality, a modality that is basic to all our interactions with world, then the world must be seen as itself a site of conativity – a site of self-configuration and self-increase.

This is the metaphysic underlying the modality of synergy in the present connection. It is not materialist, because it attributes an inner principle, an inner reality, to the world. But nor is it religious, because it involves no appeal to the supernatural. Nature itself is the site of spiritual agency.

This metaphysic that underlies the modality of synergy might be described as *post-materialist*, and the society that is based on it a *post-materialist society*.

Post-materialism does not reduce to ecology, because it does not limit the conative possibilities of the world only to those of ecosystems.

Affinities between synergy and Daoism

The worldview presupposed by synergy has strong affinities with the worldview underlying Daoism, as expressed in the classical texts of Laozi and Zhuangzi. There is, according to these texts, an active inner principle or pattern in the world (*Dao*) that manifests in all things, provided they are left to follow their own conative inclinations (*de*).

This underlying assumption gives rise in Daoism to the idea of *wu wei* as a basic modality – a basic way of being in the world. To act in accordance with *wu wei* is to harness forces or principles or patterns already at play in our environment to carry us

to our ends, rather than expending energy ourselves to attain those ends. In other words, *wu wei* encourages us to adapt our ends so that we can achieve them via the conativities already unfolding in our environment. In this way we exercise our agency – we are proactive in the pursuit of our goals – without strain to ourselves or insult to the world.

The philosophy of synergy echoes the approach implied by *wu wei*, but also extends it. From the synergistic point of view we can engage with the world in such a way that we change the direction of its unfolding while at the same time fully respecting its inner nature, its conativity, and hence its integrity.

An everyday experience which illustrates the distinction between *wu wei* and synergy is that of the hitchhiker. A hitchhiker acting in the *wu wei* mode adapts her destination to the destinations of cars or trucks already on the road. A hitchhiker in the synergistic mode, by contrast, *engages with* the driver of the vehicle in which she is a passenger; she engages him in a conversation that will ultimately change the destination, because it will change the desire, of hitchhiker and driver alike. A destination emerges from their encounter which is new for both of them, but true to the desire of each.

The basic modality of a post-materialist society is wu wei and, by extension, synergy.

Implications of synergy for development and environmental management

Developers and environmental managers operating in the synergistic mode will seek new accommodations between humanity and the wider system of life rather than subordinating this system to humanity, or humanity to this system. Such accommodations will, ideally, enrich and enlarge the conativities of both humanity and the life systems. This means that developers and environmental managers will not so much seek to limit human production and consumption as turn the productive and consumptive processes themselves into resources for the life system.

Examples of this approach: production processes and infrastructure, including buildings, will be designed to harness ambient energies, such as those of sun and wind, to power their operations; they will purify the air and water they pollute, use natural rather than chemical or mechanical systems wherever possible (eg micro-organisms may be used to break down toxic compounds) and convert “waste” into fertilizer or food or raw materials for further production. The aim is to redesign production processes so that they actually enhance the natural environment, creating opportunities and resources for life systems that would not have been available in the absence of such productive activity. In this sense the products of our economic processes – the expressions of our conativity - will never be exclusively for human use but will always be intended to serve the conativities of the wider life system as well. In this sense environmental management eventually ceases to be a separate sphere of policy and activity and instead merges into the design of development.

In post-materialist societies then, every aspect of praxis may be conceived as an opportunity to contribute to, and enlarge, the conativities of the universe. Industry and economics will be designed with this goal in mind. Indeed, if economics is defined as the study of the deployment of energy required for the satisfaction of human needs then it is through its economics that a society will demonstrate its basic relation to the world. In this sense economics becomes the premier vehicle of our engagement with

Dao because it is through our economics that we are most implicated in materiality. As the tool of economics, industry could take on the aspect, in a post-materialist society, of the great rituals of cosmic renewal performed in many pre-materialist societies. In these rituals human beings cast themselves as co-creators of the cosmos. They intuited that human conativity and cosmic conativity are not distinct but that human conativity can enhance and renew cosmic conativity and vice versa. In effect these rituals enacted a ceremonial synergy between humanity and cosmos. However, they traditionally took place within the space of religion – a space of supernaturalism that existed in addition to the space of the natural and the everyday. The challenge for post-materialist societies is to make the space of the natural the arena for cosmic renewal, for daily synergy with the universe. “Development”, in this context, becomes a metaphysical path for society as well as a path towards material improvement.

Please note: this summary does not follow the original exactly or outline all the ideas explored in the original.