

# **We Cannot Act Effectively in the World Without an Adequate Understanding of the Nature of the World<sup>1</sup>**

**By Herman Greene**

How we understand the nature of the world is our philosophy whether we use the term philosophy or not. We cannot act effectively in the world without an adequate understanding of the nature of the world. Our present situation calls for wisdom, insight, intimacy, solidarity and creativity as we give form to a new age. None of these are, however, possible if we do not understand the nature of the world.

The modern period, while opening up new vistas of understanding and much progress in human affairs, has introduced many distortions in our understanding of the world. Descartes is considered the originator of modern philosophy in the West. His “Cartesian dualism” divided mind from matter. Other ontological dualisms of the modern period include fact and value, primary qualities and secondary qualities, science and the humanities, the religious and the secular, humans and nature, objective and subjective, and civilized and uncivilized. These dualisms have become natural for the modern mind, but they are not natural to nature, not even our human nature.

Much can be written about how contemporary philosophy has accommodated itself to the un-natural distortions of the modern worldview. The philosopher E. Maynard Adams in “The Mission of Philosophy Today,”<sup>2</sup> describes how, in the modern period, scientific naturalism, based on sensory empiricism, materialism and efficient causation, seeped into and came to dominate the cultural mind. He wrote that this is attributable to the great success of science:

Empirical science provided the factual knowledge that was fruitful in making things and in the manipulation and control of the material environment. In time, the great success of empirical science in providing the knowledge base for mastery of nature, the making of useful things, and the production of wealth led to the discrediting of all other kinds of knowledge claims.<sup>3</sup>

Further, the presuppositions of science undermined the humanistic dimensions of society and led to skepticism, subjectivism, relativism and even nihilism in the cultural sphere.

Science . . . eliminated, normative, value, and meaning concepts, the fundamental categories of the humanities and humanistic thought in general, from its

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<sup>1</sup>This article is excerpted from Herman Greene, “[Process Ecozoics](#).”

<sup>2</sup>E. Maynard Adams, “The Mission of Philosophy Today,” *Metaphilosophy* 31, no. 4 (July 2000): 349-64,

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 354-55.

descriptive/explanatory conceptual system because they cannot be funded with meaning by sensory experience, and so statements containing them [could] not be confirmed or falsified by scientific methods of inquiry. Thus, according to the presuppositions of modern science, there are no normative laws, values, inherent structures of meaning, ends, or teleological causality in nature—only existential and factual structures and elemental and antecedent causes that engage them. One cannot accept modern science’s descriptive/explanatory account of something as the truth about it without accepting its presuppositions about the basic structure of the world. Yet the presuppositions of science are inconsistent with the presuppositions of most religious beliefs and humanistic thought in general.<sup>4</sup>

Adams wrote of a “cultural mind” based on a widely shared set of assumptions and beliefs. He believed it is the province of philosophy to discover and critique the presuppositions of experience, thought, and action in the cultural mind. Further, philosophy needs to “[excavate] the inherent commitments about the categorial structures of various subject matters and the world as a whole that are hidden in these presuppositions, and to develop an account of how the culture is grounded in and maps[,or is not grounded in and does not map,] the basic structure of the world.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Adams, however, philosophy must itself be reformed before it can undertake this task:

Before philosophy can perform its wider cultural mission, it must put its own house in order, for it has been caught up in the dominant ways of thought in the culture and has tried to accommodate itself to the prevailing scientific paradigm of knowledge. Although much of what is taken for granted in our efforts to know and to cope with reality is no doubt subject to empirical confirmation or correction, the most fundamental assumptions and beliefs that constitute the mind of the culture are not. They pertain to the categorial features and structures of experience and thought as well as to the basic constitutive features and structures of whatever the subject matter of our experience and thought may be, including a comprehensive view of the world. *We do not discover these features and structures of things by an empirical investigation of them in the way in which we discover contingent features and structures; rather, the way we empirically investigate and think about any subject matter presupposes commitments about its categorial features and structures. These presuppositions govern the outcome of empirical investigations rather than being the products of such investigations.* This is not to say that our empirical findings may not generate problems that call into question our

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 353-54.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 357.

categorial commitments, but these problems are of a different order from the logical problems among empirical beliefs that force revisions to keep them faithful to reality.<sup>6</sup>

Adams undertook to reform philosophy. His method concerned the analysis of “the categorial structure of any given subject matter by considering the grammar of the language we use in reporting and describing it and what it makes sense to say and does not make sense to say about it.”<sup>7</sup> He felt that “all experiences, all mental states and acts, are semantically constituted; that is, there are inherent structures of meaning with a semantic content and a logical form. This is as true of our affective, somatic (bodily) and conative (will or purpose) experiences, as of our sensory experiences of physical things.”<sup>8</sup> And if this was true about our human experience, then it must also be true about the universe.

His paper “Rethinking the Idea of God”<sup>9</sup> included a section on “Rethinking Nature.” Following his method, he observed that the scientific naturalism that had diminished the understanding of the human had also diminished nature; and, as Teilhard de Chardin did<sup>10</sup>, and also as Whitehead did in a different way,<sup>11</sup> Adams rethought nature in terms of the human phenomenon. He wrote,

[Scientific naturalism] left us with a view of nature, the primary subject matter of science, as factually structured through and through, without any interiority, without a semantic or normative dimension. Everything was considered in principle subject to our manipulation and control, the only limit being our power, which could be increased through advances in science and technology. . . .

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 356, italics added. This paragraph was not included in the paper “Process Ecozoics.”

<sup>7</sup>Adams, “Mission of Philosophy Today,” 357.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 358.

<sup>9</sup>E. Maynard Adams, “Rethinking the Idea of God,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XXXIX (2001): 313-329; available online at <http://emadams.unc.edu/Rethinking-the-Idea-of-God> (accessed October 31, 2011).

<sup>10</sup>Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, Sarah Appleton-Weber, trans. (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup>Whitehead accepted the Descartes subjectivist bias under which “those subjects enjoying conscious experience provide the primary data for philosophy.” Rather than this leading to dualism, as it did with Descartes, Whitehead developed the reformed subjectivist principle under which the subjectivity we humans experience became an element of all of nature. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality (Corrected Edition)*. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, eds. (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 159.

It seems that if we accept the modern scientific view of nature, we must accept the human phenomenon as supernatural, either emerging out of the natural realm but categorially quite different or else the product of special creation by some supernatural power. In science, we recognize the emergence of certain properties. For instance, water has properties not possessed by the elements that constitute it. But the elements and their organization explain water and its properties. However, there is no accounting for categorial structures. We cannot explain subject matter with normative and inherent meaning structures in terms of subject matter with only factual structures. If a categorially enriched subject matter should appear in a context with only existential and factual structures, its appearance would be a total mystery. In fact, there would be two mysteries: the new categorial structures and their appearance at the time and place in which they came into being. This has led some to think in terms of special creation. But that generates the mystery of a transcendent creative power with its categorial structure. That amounts to explaining a mystery by embedding it in a larger mystery created for the purpose. The intellectual quest drives us toward the reduction of mystery, not the multiplication or enlargement of it.

The most plausible course seems to be to rethink nature in such a way that we can account for the appearance of the categorially rich biological and human realms as developments in or fulfillment of preexisting nature. In other words, the fact that biological and human phenomena appear on this planet in a “natural” environment tells us something about the “natural” environment, for it must be such that it brings forth the biological and the full array of human phenomena. . . . Hence, we seem compelled to reintroduce humanistic categories into the descriptive/explanatory language of science in its account of nature. If so, we have a new humanistic view of nature and less mystery. Of course the categorial structures of factuality, normativity, semantic intentionality, and causality (whether naturalistic in the modern sense or teleological) remain givens without explanation, for there is no logical room for an explanation of such basic features of the world.<sup>12</sup>

We cannot act effectively in the world without an adequate understanding of the nature of the world.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.