

ECOZOIC IDEAS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY*

By Herman Greene

As we enter the 21st century, here are some thoughts about ways we might better understand and move forward into the Ecozoic era.

Terminology

A shared understanding of terminology is necessary for clarity. As well, I think it's helpful for an author to explain his personal usage.

As Thomas Berry has said, we need a new language.¹ The first word in this new language would have to be "ecozoic." As used by Thomas, "ecozoic" most often appears in conjunction with "era." He describes the "Ecozoic era" as a period of mutually enhancing relationships between humans and the larger community of life. He also uses the term "Ecozoic era" in a technical sense to refer to a geo-biological period in Earth's history, succeeding the current Cenozoic era, which Thomas and others believe is coming to an end due to a mass extinction of species and alteration of Earth's geo-, hydro-, bio-, and atmospheres, resulting from human disruption of natural processes. As such, the Ecozoic era does not yet exist and would only come into existence as a result of increased human awareness and conscious human choices. If appropriate choices are made, humans may yet live in an integral relationship with the Earth community. If they are not made, some believe natural disasters will sweep over Earth, radically altering life in ways that are unforeseeable, but are expected to severely diminish complex webs of life and render whole species and species groups extinct.

Your alternative or additional definitions of "ecozoic" will help us to supplement our understanding of the term and broaden the base of those who are who are generally drawn to the ideas in Thomas Berry's writings. For my part, I have found several other uses of "Ecozoic" to be informative.

Ecozoic: A Particular Strand within the Environmental Movement

Many writers describe several phases of the environmental movement. One was the conservation movement which began perhaps with John Muir at the end of the 19th century. The second was the anti-pollution/anti-toxin movement beginning perhaps

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¹Thomas Berry was a cultural historian and "geologist." His primary works were *The Dream of the Earth* (Sierra Club, 1988), *The Universe Story* (co-authored with Brian Swimme, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), and *The Great Work* (Bell Tower, 1999). He is often referred to in this article as "Thomas" as he is known by his friends and those who follow his work.

with Rachel Carson, and the third was the ecological (lifestyle, biodiversity, sustainability, whole-systems thinking) that began perhaps in the 1980s. In this context Ecozoic is an expansion and radicalization of what the ecological movement has become. The ecozoic focuses on the role of the human in the ecosystem. Two thoughts in Thomas Berry's *The Great Work (GW)* define the ecozoic movement: This movement proposes that (1) the "central flaw" in human development is our "mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the human and other modes of being and [has bestowed] all rights on the humans," *GW*, p. 4; and (2) "[t]he historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience." *GW*, p. 159. The task described in clause 2 is "The Great Work."

The term "The Great Work" is widely used by people who follow Thomas' thought. In common usage, it refers to any significant effort to bring about greater awareness of the interrelatedness of humans and nature or to preserve and enhance the health of nature. It is probably not often used specifically to refer to clause two above, and when it is so used, the parts of clause two concerning the means of accomplishing this mission—critical reflection, story, and shared dream experience—are probably not self-consciously appropriated. I invite you to consider the proposition that clause two above is the clearest statement of what "The Great Work" is and, from Thomas' perspective, the central issue to be addressed in the Great Work is clause one.

Ecozoic: A Particular Strand within the Humanities

Another proposition to consider is that what distinguishes the ecozoic movement from other ecological efforts is its emphasis on the humanistic dimension—on what it means to be human and on human culture. The ecozoic understanding is that the environmental crisis cannot be solved solely by addressing the human impacts on the environment or even by focusing on human behavior as regards the environment. The environmental crisis can only be forestalled when there is a broad new cultural understanding of what it means to be human. The sources of this new understanding would be (i) myth, in particular the "New Story" of the evolutionary development of the universe, (ii) spirituality, especially spirituality based on an understanding of nature as the primary revelation of the divine,² (iii) understanding the nature of existence as

²Such an understanding is not synonymous with pantheism. The point is that if in the new story of the of the universe we understand the human and all other beings as coming to be in an evolutionary process, then the spirituality we feel as humans must also be present in that evolutionary process, predate human existence, and be present in other-than-human nature. Thus, the statement "the revelation of the divine in nature is primary," means the divine revelation in nature precedes revealed human spirituality (as in the written word) and it is currently, pervasively present in existence. Poetically put, in the words of Meister Eckhart, "every creature is a book about God and is a word of God." It is in our secondary modes of revelation, talk, reflection, written texts, and holy books that we as humans

relationships occurring in community with an emphasis on bioregional community, (iv) becoming aware of subconscious archetypes of new modes of living such as those present in sleep dreaming and awake dreaming within an ecological context (it is in this way that the dream of the Earth that Thomas writes about becomes known to us), and (v) rational understanding and judgment informed by ecology as the foundation of learning where the ways of nature are understood as the primary teacher, healer and law-giver.

The work of E. Maynard Adams is another important source of this needed new cultural understanding.³ Adams has produced an extensive critique of the development of the modern mind and culture since the sixteenth century. In his view scientific naturalism has become the guiding human philosophy. He has argued that, according to scientific naturalism, existence is factually constituted and lacks a normative dimension. "Reality was understood as imposing factual limits on our will, limits that could be progressively pushed back by advances in science and technology."⁴ With such a view, the quest for wealth and power became the overriding concern of the human community and the moral and meaning dimensions of humanity were subverted. In response to this situation, Adams has called for a humanistic revolution.

Adams' critique of modernity, his analysis of the distinctness and unique role of humans and his exposition of the humanistic categories of value and meaning are important for the success of the ecozoic movement. At the same time, unless those who develop Adams' work do not do so in an ecological framework, the significance of his work will be greatly diminished. While Adams writes primarily about human affairs, his overarching argument is that the humanistic categories of value and meaning are part of the descriptive-explanatory structure of the universe, and by establishing the philosophical basis for this position he has provided grounding for ecozoic writing on the psychic-spiritual dimension of existence (which is dependent on value and meaning concepts). Adams work is consistent with that of Thomas' and he feels that Thomas in

come to know and understand this divine reality that is in all things. Yet, these secondary modes can also obscure the primary revelation and thus it is, particularly at this time, that an emphasis on intimate presence with divine as revealed in nature is of special importance.

³While Adams has written many books and articles, two of his books are of particular importance, namely *The Metaphysics of Self and World* (Temple University Press, 1991) and *A Society Fit for Human Beings* (SUNY Press, 1997). While many Ecozoans will find it difficult to accept Adams' focus on the human, his basic argument that the human is an exemplification of the categorical structure of the universe and not an anomaly is consistent with Thomas' thought that the "universe is primary and the human is derivative." In addition, Adams' exploration of what it means to be human and of the value and meaning dimensions of existence are an essential contribution to the Great Work task of "re-inventing the human."

⁴*A Society Fit for Human Beings*, p. xvi.

writing, for example, about “the dream of the Earth” or the “unfolding” of the universe story, is using humanistic categories, *i.e.*, value and meaning concepts, that are outside the range, and properly so, of the explanatory categories recognized in the scientific naturalism (what Berry might refer to as mechanistic science) that so dominates the modern mind.⁵

Adam’s work complements Thomas’. Thomas is aware that the natural world and all of its beings (each of which has a subjective dimension) affects human consciousness and that this interrelatedness is necessary for humans to be fully human. This concept is not developed in Adams’ work, nor does Adams explore the significance of the new cosmology (New Story) that is so central to Thomas’ thought. Conversely, Thomas does not develop extensively the significance of the loss of the value and meaning dimensions of life other than in an ecological context. Further, Thomas does not go into the analysis Adams gives of the unique dimensions of the human (around which humans must define their role “at the species level” and “within the community of life systems”) and of human problems in contemporary culture; and Adams’ critique of modernity and his philosophical argument for value and meaning categories are distinct and crucially important. Both Thomas and Adams would agree that it is the human that is the central problem in nature and on the importance of developing a new understanding of humans in relation to nature and of addressing the current ecological crisis.

Ecozoic as a Philosophical/Metaphysical Concept

Thomas’ understanding of the nature of reality is dependent on several key concepts:

1. ***The Unity of the Universe.*** The Universe as a whole is an interacting community of beings inseparably related in space and time. From its beginning the Universe has had a psychic-spiritual dimension. The Universe is a communion of subjects not a collection of objects.

⁵Thomas Berry poses a “humanistic” issue when he speaks of re-inventing the human. Thomas, however, stresses that this cannot be separated from the new cosmology (the New Story) and integration with the larger community of life. He therefore generally objects to the treatment of the human problem in humanistic terms in the manner in which Adams does. This may, in part, be due to a lack of recognition that Adams is not simply talking about the human, rather he is making a metaphysical argument for the reality of the value and meaning of the dimension of existence, categories that have been largely denied in the modern scientific worldview. Still, it is true that Adams’ primary focus has been on what it means to be human and the significance of his work must, to a large extent, be measured by his contribution in this area. I feel that if we take the categories of communion, subjectivity and differentiation, then in terms of the subjectivity and differentiation of the human species, focus on the human is required. We need an adequate understanding of self as well as self-in-relation, though of course it is only possible to separate these two as an analytic matter.

2. **Modes of Expression.** The Universe expresses itself at all levels of reality through differentiation (diversity), subjectivity (interiority, self-organization), and communion (intimacy, interrelatedness).
3. **Cosmogogenesis.** The Universe is a creative, emergent, evolutionary reality that has developed from the time of the primordial flaring forth, and is still developing, through a sequence of irreversible transformations.

The development and exposition of this understanding of the nature of reality is an essential part of the ecozoic movement. This set of concepts has profound philosophical/metaphysical meaning. Teilhard de Chardin, drawing on his knowledge as a paleontologist, articulated these concepts. The most systematic elaboration of these concepts, however, is found in the writing of Alfred North Whitehead. Thus I propose that the ecozoic movement would be constructively informed by Whitehead's process philosophy. Understanding this philosophical framework permits the application of the wisdom of the New Story to every dimension of human expression. Yet, as with Adams' work, unless process philosophy is grounded in an ecological context, it loses relevance, and, conversely, the process philosophy movement has much to gain from greater exposure to and understanding of the ecozoic as articulated by Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and others.

However, if the ecozoic movement is to succeed, no one line of thought or set of understandings should become doctrine, not even Thomas Berry's. There are those who will disagree with the formulation of the nature of reality given above, and one very well-known member of the ecozoic movement has already objected on the basis that it is contrary to "emergent biology." Right living is far more important to the ecozoic than right thinking. Yet, because we are human, our actions are guided by our thinking, therefore, as a movement, we cannot ignore dealing with our thinking, including those parts of our thinking that may be labeled "philosophical." Philosophy examines the basic presuppositions out of which humans operate and certainly those are in question and subject to examination and development in the move to the ecozoic.

Ecozoic as the Name of a Human Historical Period to Succeed the Modern Period and a Synonym for Constructive Post-Modernism

The achievements of modernity are extremely significant—democracy, human rights, modern science, the industrial revolution, and so forth. The way to the future is through modernity, not by going backwards to a neo-traditional worldview.⁶ At the

⁶As described in *The Cultural Creatives* by Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson (Harmony Books, 2000), there are at present two dominant competing worldviews, one the modern, and the other the neo-traditional. In addition, there is an emerging third way, that of the "cultural creatives." The cultural

same time the limitations of modernity are increasingly evident. We need a perspective that is post-modern, and, more particularly, constructively post-modern.⁷ A truly constructive post-modernism must be termed “Ecozoic” in order to capture the idea that humans and other-than-human nature must move into the future together as a single community of being.

The Ecozoic Movement as It Resembles the Modern Movement.

We must think of the ecozoic movement as being like the Enlightenment or as the modern movement as a whole, which began in the 16th century. Hundreds of years and a systematic development of key ideas were required for the modern movement to take full effect. Where we are now, at the end of the period, George W. Bush can say that “we must protect freedom and democracy” as if it were inarguable and self-evident. At the beginning of the 16th century, this mandate would have been literally inconceivable. Here are some key parts of the philosophical journey from then to now:

By moderns we mean the intellectual and psychic inheritors of the civilizational movement, largely based in the West but now influential throughout the world, that began in the sixteenth century with (i) the scientific revolution initiated by Copernicus, 1473-1543—the separation of theory from observable phenomenon; Galileo, 1564-42—“the separation of physical science from philosophy, the abandonment of authority as a criterion of scientific truth, the distinction between objective and subjective qualities in observable phenomena and the introduction or reintroduction of empirical and skeptical elements into philosophical investigations”; Bacon 1561-1626—the father of the scientific method who separated metaphysics, as that which is concerned with final causes, and physics which was concerned with physical and efficient causes, *i.e.*, cause and effect relationships based on the observed regularities of nature; and Isaac Newton 1642-1727—who established mechanistic science as the study of objects in motion where transformation in the phenomenal world was based on the laws of locomotion (absolute space and time, and no action at a distance), and in doing so doing relegated metaphysics and God to the beginnings of the cosmos; (ii) the Protestant Reformation (1517) that separated individual consciousness and choice from metaphysically authoritative social systems; and

creatives are those who have responded to the various rights, justice, consciousness and environmental movements of the 20th century, and at this point they coalesce into an aggregate of movements. The Ecozoic movement is in a sense an effort to bring an integral understanding to the tendencies found in the cultural creatives. As argued by Ken Wilbur in *The Theory of Everything* (Shambala, 2000), at p. 30, such an integral understanding is needed if the promise represented by the cultural creatives is to be realized.

⁷Acknowledgment is due to David Ray Griffin of the Center for Process Studies in Claremont, California, for the term constructive post-modernism. It is the title of a series of books edited by him and published by SUNY Press.

(iii) the philosophical transformation led by Rene Descartes, 1596-1650, who separated human consciousness from the mechanistic natural world, and within the human, mind and spirit from body. From this beginning, and partly coincident with it, rose the modern nation state (Machiavelli, 1469-1527; Thomas Hobbes 1588-1679; John Locke 1623-1704 and secular historical developments) with the requirements of the state to maintain order, establish the public good, and defend human rights. This was followed by the Enlightenment in the 18th century with the declaration of human rights (for example, Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, 1792), capitalistic enterprise (Adam Smith 1723-90), democracy (the American Revolution, 1776, and the French revolution, 1789), and the belief in progress (for example, the Marquis de Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, published in 1795 expressing "an extraordinarily optimistic utopia of indefinite progress toward . . . a doctrine of 'natural salvation'—the attainment by everyone of immortality in this flesh on this earth").⁸

The ecozoic movement will require this same kind of effort and evolution through time. Because of the gravity of the ecological problem, however, the time period must be reduced. This may be possible given modern communication. Still, it is important to note that, historically, a long time lapses between the birth of an idea and its broad inclusion in culture and human behavior, often centuries. It is not clear how or whether such a transformation can be forced to occur in culture in a short time-period.

The point here is that the ecozoic movement is, in part, a movement to deal with immediate environmental problems, but more broadly, it is a movement based on ideas which will be developed and taught with great care and effort over a long period of time. Probably most of the ideas for the ecozoic came into being in the 20th century. They have not, however, been put in the service of a guiding or unifying vision. A catchword or meme is needed, like "democracy!" or "freedom!" for which we can hoist a banner, fly a flag, and march off to do battle with current levels of human understanding. The term "Ecozoic" could be such a catchword. Its use can weave strands of thought into a broad historical movement with a transformative set of ideas.

The Ecozoic as a Religious Movement

Probably the greatest parallel to what would be needed to bring the ecozoic into being is a religious movement, like the birth and spread of Christianity or Islam in their beginnings. Thomas believes we are being led by the dream that gave form to the Universe, the dream of the Earth. He and others also believe we are hearing the cry or voice of the Earth. Thus, Thomas also speaks about a meta-religious movement. In so

⁸This summary is based on and the quoted passages are taken from essays appearing in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York, McMillan Publishing Company, Inc. and the Free Press, 1967).

doing, he is not talking about a new creed or set of practices. He is referring to a universal awakening to Earth as a single, sacred community of being. It is by means of such a meta-religious movement that the necessarily rapid transformation of culture will occur, if at all. Such a breakthrough is coming into being in a million, often confusing and divergent and sometimes disconcerting, ways—from eco-tourism, to the new paganism and goddess worship, to blessings of animals and animal rights . . . to conservation movements and the widespread interest in gardening, especially organic gardening, and natural living. Someone defined theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Perhaps the ecozoic is the awakening to the dream of the Earth seeking understanding.

The Ecozoic as a Transformation of Human Civilizational Presence

“Ecozoic” has special meaning when used in conjunction with “societies,” as “ecozoic societies.” Ecozoic societies are human societies based on organic understandings of nature, rather than a mechanistic or extractive/use understandings. Ecozoic societies will involve changes in government, business and education, the arts, religion . . . in every aspect of human societies.

The Ecozoic as an Environmental Movement

In the end we have to return to the ecozoic movement as an environmental movement. Throughout the coming into being of the Ecozoic era and in its full manifestation, a fundamental concern of the ecozoic movement must be the health of non-human species and natural processes. Action to this end will include pollution control, preservation of natural areas and many other things, and will be accomplished through protest and transformational activity. Each of these and similar activities is an important part of the ecozoic.

Summation - The Ecozoic as the House of Life

The root words for ecozoic are “eco,” which means “house,” and “zoic,” which means “life.” Ecozoic means “house of life,”—it is the hope for the future and provides a guiding vision. Bringing the Ecozoic era into being is the Great Work of our time.

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