

EDWARD GOLDSMITH, *THE WAY: AN ECOLOGICAL WORLDVIEW*
(Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, rev. ed. 1998)

Review by Herman Greene

Thomas Berry wrote in *The Great Work* that ecology is not another course or program, it is the foundation of all courses because it is a functional cosmology. Berry never to my knowledge explained why he sometimes wrote that the universe story is a functional cosmology and, at other times, ecology is a functional cosmology. It is clear to me, however, that, in both cases, when Berry wrote about cosmology he meant cosmology in the philosophical sense—philosophical cosmology—rather than physical cosmology. This was evident in his last years when in conversation he would say “Science hasn’t taught us anything about cosmology. When science [(physical cosmology)] thinks it is a cosmology [(philosophical cosmology)], it becomes a danger. When science [(physical cosmology)] functions with an adequate cosmology [(philosophical cosmology)], it becomes a wisdom.” A functional cosmology, for Berry is one that allows us to locate ourselves and act authentically within the world as it is.

It is also clear to me that when Berry wrote about ecology he meant something other than or more than ecology as a subdiscipline of biology. In *The Dream of the Earth* he said, with reference to his claim that we are entering an ecological age:

I use the term *ecological* in its primary meaning as the relation of an organism to its environment, but also as an indication of the interdependence of all living and nonliving systems of the earth. This vision of a planet integral with itself throughout its spatial extent and its evolutionary sequence is of primary importance if we are to have the psychic power to undergo the psychic and social transformations that are being demanded of us. (*Dream of the Earth*, pp. 41-42)

While Berry wrote that ecology is a functional cosmology, he did not provide a systematic philosophy of ecology and culture that constitutes an ecological worldview and he did not specify how people should live in the future in accordance with that worldview. Edward Goldsmith in *The Way* did.

All of Goldsmith’s ideas resonate with Berry’s thought and expand on it, though not with reference to Berry. Goldsmith draws on many of the same sources as Berry, including notably the wisdom of Indigenous people, which Goldsmith refers to as vernacular or chthonic people. Vernacular features of societies are those that have not been imposed on it by the state, commercial enterprises, or some other external force, but have arisen from the self-organizing and self-governing dynamics within the societies. Vernacular people are those who live within vernacular societies. Chthonos was the Greek god of the Earth and chthonic people are those tribal and peasant societies largely outside the orbit of the modern world who revere Earth. Goldsmith also draws extensively on Alfred North Whitehead.

He opens his book with chapters on ecology:

- Ecology is a unified organization of knowledge
- Ecology seeks to establish the laws of nature
- Ecology studies natural systems in their Gaian context
- Ecology is holistic
- Ecology is teleological
- Ecology explains events in terms of their role within the spatio-temporal Gaian hierarchy
- Ecology is qualitative
- Ecology is subjective
- Ecology is emotional
- Ecology is a faith
- Ecology reflects the values of the biosphere

He proceeds to write on the characteristics of natural systems and then moves to the characteristics of vernacular societies. The equivalent of the Great Work in Goldsmith is “following the Way.” The “Way” is the ethos of vernacular societies. Such societies, Goldsmith writes,

emphasized two fundamental principles that necessarily underlie an ecological world-view. The first is that the living world of ecosphere is the basic source of all benefits and hence of all wealth, but will only dispense these benefits to us if we preserve its critical order. From this fundamental first principle follows the second, which is that the overriding goal of the behavior pattern of an ecological society must be to preserve the critical order of the natural world or of the cosmos that encompasses it. (P. xv)

The argument put forward in this book is that we can only conceivably do better if, among other things, we set out to re-interpret our problems in light of a very different world-view—the world-view of ecology—inspired as it must be by the chthonic world-view entertained by our remote ancestors who knew, as modern man no longer knows, how to live on this planet. (P. 424)

Like Berry, Goldsmith judges modernity and progress harshly:

Instead of interpreting our problems as the inevitable consequence of economic development or progress—that anti-evolutionary process that diverts us ever further from the Way—we [(modern people)] interpret them instead as evidence that economic development *has not proceeded far or fast enough*—that, in effect, we have not deviated sufficiently from the Way.

This is the essence of the Great Misinterpretation—the ultimate manifestation of modern man’s cognitive maladjustment to the industrial world that he has created. It draws us into a chain-reaction leading to ever greater social and environmental

destruction, from which we must waste no time in extracting ourselves if we are to have any future at all on this planet. (P. 431)

Even more than Berry, Goldsmith judges the philosophical foundations and practice of modern science:

Those who support the notion that economic and technological progress is part and parcel of the evolutionary process usually regard the early stages of evolution as instinctive, while the later stages that we associate with technological progress are seen to be conscious and purposive. . . .

For them, “human evolution,” as they refer to it, is the latest phase of evolution and it is principally the product of the development of *mind, consciousness and reason*. Because they considered man to be endowed with these three unique attributes, *he is free to determine his own evolution—unencumbered, they clearly intimate, by any obligation to subject his progressive activities to any social, ecological or cosmic constraints*.

In light of the analysis provided in this book, however, what they call human evolution or progress is the very negation of evolution or the Gaian Process, and is best referred to as anti-evolution. Since evolution can be equated with the Way, serving as it does to maintain the critical order and hence the stability of the ecosphere, progress or anti-evolution can be equated with the anti-Way—serving to disrupt the critical order of the ecosphere and to reduce its stability. (P. 420)

Goldsmith does not expect his vision to be accepted by those wedded consciously or unconsciously to the modern worldview. What is needed is a conversion to a new conceptual framework:

For people to accept the principles listed in this book, it is the paradigm of science itself that must be abandoned and hence the world-view of modernism which it faithfully reflects; and they must be replaced by the world-view of ecology. Such a conversion or generalized paradigm shift, involves a profound rearrangement or recombination of the knowledge that makes up our world-view. It must affect its very metaphysical, ethical and aesthetic foundations. It must, in fact, involve a change akin to a religious conversion. (P. 435)

His vision of the future is of vernacular community-based societies. We of CES recognize this as an essential element of an ecozoic future, but we do not foresee an end to global economic and political structures, of global ecological and social structures, or of the technological enterprise and the science that supports it. For us, it is not either/or, rather it is both/and. We agree with Goldsmith, however, that an ecozoic future must be grounded in the local, global structures must serve the local and protect nature, and our technologies must be coherent with and support Earth’s natural processes.

Here is Goldsmith's vision:

The world-view of ecology is very much that of the vernacular community-based society, whereas the world-view of modernism is that of industrial society. We must set out to combat and systematically weaken the main institutions of the industrial system—the state, the corporations—and the science and the technology that they use to transform society and the natural world. At the same time, we must do everything to help recreate the family and the community, and above all a localized and diversified economy based on them, reducing in this way our increasingly universal dependence on a destructive economic system. (P. 438)

The Way is a long, immensely rich, and captivating read. It explains the vital dynamics of our Earth community in a nondualistic (inclusive of nature and humans) way, and what, in Goldsmith's view, we humans must do to live within it.