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Deep Ecology for the 22nd Century

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Not my title! Why did my friends insist on that title? Because of my many conversations of this kind:

NN: Are you an optimist or a pessimist? AN: Optimist! NN: (Astonished) Really? AN: Yes, convinced optimist—When it comes to the 22nd Century. NN: You mean of course the 21st? AN: 22nd! The life of the grandchildren of our grandchildren. Are you not interested in the world of your grandchildren! NN: You mean we can relax because we have a lot of time available to overcome the ecological crisis? AN: How terrible, shamefully bad conditions will be in the 21st Century, or how far down we have to start on the way up, **DEPENDS ON WHAT YOU, YOU**, and others do today and tomorrow. There is not a single day to be lost. We need activism on high level immediately.

The answer that I am an optimist is a reaction against the so-called doomsday prophets, people who talk *as if* they mean nothing can be done to get things straight. There are very few but they are heavily exploited by people in power who speak soothingly that the task ahead is not very great and that current government policies can turn the tide towards the better. A telling example is the cover of *Newsweek* magazine which just before the Rio Conference used the headline "The End is not Near". No pep talk, no admission that we are in for a great task that will require new thinking. The very opposite of a slogan used when a big corporation is 'in the red': New thinking, greater efforts are called for. Nor is the slogan like those of Churchill in 1940: Of course we win, but there will be many tears and much sweat to be shed.

In short, there is no time for pessimistic utterances which can be exploited by the passivists and the dangerous bagatellizations.

Even among ecophilosophers there may be some who find the talk about the 22nd Century somewhat gloomy, and who foresee the (practical?) possibility for a change towards the better (for decrease of unsustainability) before the year 2000. At least Henryk Skolimowski foresees such a change..2. But perhaps I ask for more than he does: Broad ecological sustainability, and therefore turning the corner implies reducing the level of broad ecological unsustainability.

My optimism tells me it's realistic to expect or hope that by the year 2101 the decrease is definitely on the way. How much is left of nature in 2101 evidently depends on what we do today and tomorrow. What I do and neglect to do today is in part to tell you this! To reach what I call *broad* ecological sustainability of the human enterprise on this unique planet may take a long time, and longer the more we *increase* unsustainability this year and in the years to come. The message is of a simple well-known kind: The recovery from our illness will take time, and the more time for every day we neglect to try *seriously* to stop the illness getting worse. The healing policies of today are not serious. The deep ecology movement is for today, but the definitive victories will go scarcely before the 22nd Century.

Roughly, I call ecological sustainability broad if and only if the change ("development") of life conditions on the planet is such that it ensures full richness ("abundance") and diversity of life forms on Earth (to the extent *humans* can ensure it). Every key word of this criterion of course needs clarification, but it makes such sustainability obviously different from what is increasingly accepted politically, the 'narrow' ecological sustainability: An existence of short and long range policies such that most researchers agree that their continuation makes ecological catastrophes affecting human narrow interests unlikely. This is politically acceptable today as a *goal* for global development. But broad ecological sustainability centers on ecological conditions, not only of humanity, and the dangerous concepts of development are avoided. By development is still meant something like increase of GNP, rather than of life quality.

So the big open question is: How far down are we going to sink before we start heading upwards in the year 2101? How low down are we going to fall before there is a clear trend of *decreasing* ecological unsustainability? It may be useful to consider some scenarios:

1. No major change of ecological policies and of the extent of poverty. An ecological catastrophe occurs because of slowly accumulating effects of a century of ecological folly. The dramatic situation forces new ecologically strict policies, perhaps through undemocratic, even brutal dictatorial military means used by the rich countries.
2. The same development except for a major change in the poor countries: considerable economic growth of the Western kind. Five times as many people live unsustainably. A breakdown follows very soon, and harsh measures are applied to fight chaos and to start a decrease of unsustainability.
3. A couple of similar development ending in catastrophic and chaotic conditions and subsequent harsh, brutal policies implemented by the most powerful states. A turn towards sustainability, but after enormous devastations.
4. Ecological enlightenment, a realistic appreciation of the drastic reduction of life quality, an increased influence of deep ecological attitude, slow decrease of the sum total of unsustainability. Trend of decreasing unsustainability discernable in the year 2101.

Our hope: the rational fifth scenario, that guarantees a least strenuous way to be started on in the year 2101.

Then a non-scenario: *abject* poverty in large areas worsens and ignites wars and revolts resulting in chaotic conditions and ecological catastrophe.

I call it a non-scenario because abject poverty seems to foster passivity, not large scale revolts. Dictators can, as perhaps in East Asia, transport very poor people into rainforests, but these people can also be forced to remain in cities. So I do not see a catastrophe because of vastly increased abject poverty. Nor do I expect a major nuclear war. (These of course have the character of guesses.) The question raised was: how far down?

Now a short note on three great contemporary world-wide movements which call for grassroot activism.

The three movements are: the peace movement, the oldest and at present remarkably dormant. But if military expenditures are not rapidly decreasing from about 900 billion dollars a year, I expect it will revive. Then there are many movements I put together under the name 'the social justice movement'. It includes the feminist movement and part of the social ecology movement. As the third movement, one might perhaps also use the more vague term, radical environmentalism because to use the specific terminology of deep ecology will sooner or later elicit boredom and aggression. But the name 'radical environmentalism' smacks of the old metaphor suggesting humanity surrounded by

something outside, the so-called environment of humans; it does not start with ecological concepts. And in the US it will take a long time before radicalism loses its connection with the political *red-blue axis* which now is irrelevant.

The Political Triangle

Green

Red

Blue

The deep ecology movement has in common with blue politics its aversion to bureaucracy, its emphasis on personal enterprise and initiative, and a reluctance to take certain green utopias too seriously. With the old politics of the Western European kind the common ground is more obvious, the fight on the side of the underdog, solidarity with the underprivileged or the powerless, extension of care.

Broad ecological sustainability may be compatible with a variety of social and political structures, all pointing towards the green pole.

It is not easy to be personally active in more than one of the three grassroots movements, but a cooperation is essential. The ecological threat is not only of wars but also of the immense military operations and connected industrial activity in peace time. Cooperation has for a long time been excellent. It has taken longer to establish close cooperation with all the social justice movements. But because care and capacity of identification with other living beings is so prominent in the deep ecology movement, that social initiative is fairly clear.

The small minority of supporters of the deep ecology movement who write in periodicals, talk in public and organize conferences, sometimes meet people who are sceptical about their ethical status: Are they not much more fond of animals than of humans? The answer is that whatever the intensity of their fight for animals, or wilderness, they recognize the very special obligations we have for our fellow-humans. What we look for is not a shift of care from humans towards non-humans, but an extension and deepening of care. It is unwarranted to assume that the human potential of care is constant and finite, and that any increase of care for some creatures necessarily reduces care for others.

One should in today's discussion not forget that the vast majority of the supporters of the deep ecology movement don't have a public image, especially not those in the Third World, who are distressed about the degradation of their locality or bioregion. They have no access to any kind of mass-communication, or may not even have the inclination to make use of any. The deep ecology theorists are servants rather than masters.

An open question: How do they look, the future ecologically sustainable societies?

The title is 'deep ecology for the 22nd Century'. So what could be the great goals we would be on the right road to establish in the 22nd and the next centuries? My answer will sound uninspiring to most of my close friends. But not to my brothers in business. I have always had friends among people in business. I have followed closely the work of my much older shipping brother Erling who directed a couple of million tons of oil tankers luckily without, spills. I have been at more or less secret meetings between him and his millionaire and even billionaire friends. How did my brother introduce me to such people? He'd say: "He is only a poor philosopher and doesn't understand what we are up to. He is completely harmless." This way I confirmed my guess that intensively energetic people also in the centuries to come will tend to aspire to bigness rather than to greatness:

Creativeness, even 'fortitude and generosity' (Spinoza), but without pretension of greatness in the cultural sphere. Let them have ample elbow room, but within a strong ecological and ethical framework, one which is deep compared with today's structure, which is a really harsh ecological and ethical framework; hopefully this depth will require only moderate bureaucracy.

Transporting oil will not be among the highly profitable occupations, but there are indefinitely many other openings in the different future societies in ecological balance. And there will be opportunity for the tiny minority who yearn for living in wilderness, on its own premise, to do exactly that. Small children will have the opportunity to develop deep ecological attitudes in patches of free nature. These are some of my conjectures. The societies developing in the 22nd Century, at the earliest, I *suspect*, will not look like the green societies outlined since the 60s. They will have more traits in common with what we have today. Conspicuous consumption? Of course! But several tremendously important things are different: There will be no political support of greed. The tolerance of grave social injustice will not be a dominant *factor*.

To fight the *dominance* of something should be clearly distinguished from trying to *eliminate* something. We shall always need people like my brother who rightly insists that his main goal in life has not been to amass money, but to create something useful in a world in which money is one, and of course not the only measure of success and creative power.

In sociology we often talk about entrepreneurs in a wide, important sense of socially highly energetic, creative, influential people. Their work is often controversial, sometimes clearly destructive, but they are required in any dynamic society.

I envisage big, but not dominating, centers of commerce, learning and the arts. Big buildings, vast machinery for continued exploration in physics and cosmology. But in order to do something analogous to driving around in a conspicuously wasteful luxurious car, a family would have to work hard through long hours and to renounce many goods other people can afford. Most of the family's 'Gaia-gift' would be spent on the car.

Rich people who work in the world of business, but are supporters of the deep ecology movement, ask in all seriousness whether the green utopian societies *must* look so dreary. Why portray a society which seemingly needs no big entrepreneurs, only organic farmers, modest artists, and mild naturalists. A capitalist society is in a certain sense a rather *wild* society. We need some degree of wildness, but not exactly the capitalist sort. The usual utopian green societies seem so sober and tame. We shall need enthusiasts of the extravagant, the luxuriant, the big. But they must not dominate.

In short, I do not envisage the *necessity* of any dramatic, sudden turn-around in social and political variables, when I envisage things from the limited point of view of *overcoming the still increasing ecological crisis*. But as mature human beings, —I imagine that some of us are mature or on the way to being mature—we are concerned also about non-violence and social justice. It is not required of me here to say anything more definite about these broad social and ethical issues. But I see the value of expressing vague ideas of how green societies may look. A green society in my terminology is one that has to some extent solved not only the problem of reaching ecological sustainability, but has also ensured peace and a large measure of social justice. I don't see why so many people find reasons to despair. I am confident humans have what is demanded.

Well, this is how I, a supporter of the deep ecology movement, feel today: Impatient with the doomsday prophets, confident that we have a mission, however modest, in shaping a better future that is *not remote*.

Notes

1. Slightly modified 'pep talk' given at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 28th April 1992.

2. Personal communication.

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