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THE ORIGIN OF THINKING RESTORING THE LIVING ROOTS OF RATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Wisdom is the oneness of mind that guides and permeates all things.

Heraclitus

ABSTRACT: Certain tacit assumptions of modernity are jeopardizing the future of humanity and the planet—assumptions around what constitutes life; the nature of being human; rational thought; and our view of time and progress. This paper examines the origins of why we think the way we do today and how we can reclaim the living roots of consciousness (even as they are seemingly lost or obsolete). In so doing, we restore our full humanity and help restore the Earth.

KEYWORDS: Consciousness; Eco-psychology; Panpsychism; Original thinking

The single most detrimental belief in the modern West is that the elements—light, air, water, and earth—are merely the constituents of life, but not alive themselves. Why? Because as long as we consider the water, soil, and atmosphere as dead we will continue treating them that way—destroying whatever is left of natural, healthy ecosystems. If we were to change our consciousness, however, and remember what we once knew—that the elements are alive—everything would shift. We would remember how to treat water, air, and soil *as kin*, as living relations, and the effect would be profoundly restorative for the Earth and us.

The ancients not only knew the elements are alive; they also knew that there is a reciprocal relationship between the elements inside and outside our bodies—that the human is a microcosm of the macrocosm. Leonardo da Vinci wrote:

Man has been called by the ancients a lesser [microcosm of larger] world, and indeed the term is rightly applied, seeing that if man is compounded of earth,

water, air and fire, this body of the earth is the same: and as man has within himself bones as a stay and framework for the flesh, so the world has the rocks which are the supports of the earth; as man has within him a pool of blood wherein the lungs as he breathes expands and contract, so the body of the earth has its ocean, which also rises and falls every six hours with the breathing of the world as from the said pool of blood proceed the veins which spread their branches through the human body, in just the same manner the ocean fills the body of the earth with an infinite number of veins of water. ¹

WE ARE WATER

Of all the elements, we are most closely related to water, for we are seventy percent water, just as the oceans of the Earth cover roughly seventy percent of the planet's surface. Water has a profound effect on our consciousness. This is something many of us become aware of during the phases of the moon due to its effect on tides, particularly during new and full moons (the so-called spring tides) when water levels rise due to the juxtaposition of the sun and moon.

Our consciousness, whether we realize it or not, is also affected by the hydrological cycle that moves water from the sky to the earth through precipitation and back again to the sky through evaporation. We in the West may think that the hydrological cycle occurs on its own with no relationship to human beings, but Indigenous peoples have thought otherwise for millennia. In my opinion, the Indigenous perspective is compelling. Think about it. Is it really only a coincidence that we continuously speak about the movement of thought in water metaphors?—stream of consciousness; mainstream thought; underground thought; thoughts bubbling up; memories being held in the Cloud; and so forth. Cartoonists even depict thoughts as clouds, and those that see auras claim this is not metaphor, but fact. The movement of water affects us and we affect the movement of water because we are water beings. ²

We are also affected because human consciousness is nested in a larger consciousness. Our thoughts are connected with the larger human community and with all of Nature. The flashing of lightning in the atmosphere is related to the firing of neurons in our own brain. The lightning ignites the thunderstorms that permeate the soil of Earth, but also the soil of our own consciousness. Thoughts pool like water droplets, forming streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans of thought. What we call mainstream thought is more than popular thinking; it is thought that has become so

¹ Leonardo da Vinci. *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* (Arranged, Rendered into English, and Introduced by Edward McCurdy). (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1941), 654.

² I am referring herein only to a subtle process. But obviously, humans also affect the movement of water in overt ways, such as construction of dams, irrigation canals, and so forth.

widespread that we no longer see it at all. It is the invisible backdrop of our lives—the tacit consciousness that makes up the unquestioned assumptions of a given era. The belief that the elements are dead is one such assumption. We neither acknowledge it nor test for its validity.

Most of our worldview is structured around tacit assumptions we blithely ignore. Eventually, however, our soul becomes aware that something is amiss, and if we are paying attention, our thinking will begin to feel stale and unsatisfactory. And this creates a special opportunity. If we let go of the thoughts that no longer suit us, these old ideas, like water, evaporate back into the atmosphere. We can imagine these just released ideas rising to the sky in newfound freedom; hobnobbing with other idea clouds; remixing, recharging, and coming back down to Earth in a brainstorm of fresh, new thinking.

Something like this occurs on a collective scale whenever the tacit assumptions of an era are questioned and a new paradigm emerges. A new paradigm is not totally new, however. As Kuhn understood, the newer paradigm appears more elegant, beautiful, and uplifting—a higher truth—but it is not independent of the old; it is only an original recombination of previous thought. It is also a rebalancing, allowing what has been suppressed in one era to resurface in the next. Human thought processes are part of a grand recycling, like the hydrological cycle of water. Our thoughts move like water moves, in cycles appropriate for a given era.

WE ARE AIR

We are not only water beings; we are also *Air* beings, profoundly interconnected with all there is through air and Breath. We are as dependent upon breath for our very existence as we are for drinking water. The ancients would never have dreamed of considering air to be empty space—they understood it was a *plenum*—completely filled with life force—*pneuma* (Greek); *ruach* (Hebrew); or *prana* (Sanskrit). The ancient view makes sense. Compare it with the modern view. Why would air, if devoid of life, keep us alive when we take “it” in? When exactly is the air outside our body transformed into life force? Does it suddenly become alive simply because we breathe it in?

Why, then, does mainstream science view the elements as inert? It is an extension of a piecemeal approach to all of life—a view that divides existence into separate and independent ingredients that are parts, not wholes within wholes (holons)³—and therefore, cannot be alive in themselves. The entire origin of life is imagined as emergent from non-living chemicals. These ingredients (often called pre-cellular life) comprise a primordial soup, and out of this, molecules catalyze together and at some

³ Arthur Koestler. *The Ghost in the Machine*. (New York, Penguin, 1990).

point, consciousness is created and life magically begins. The mainstream science view of how life originated is thus tantamount to the Frankenstein story. Out of death, comes life. At that moment, we might as well be shouting along with Dr. Frankenstein, “It’s alive! It’s alive!”

LIFE COMES FROM LIFE

In reality, it is life that produces life; we couldn’t be alive if we weren’t inextricably connected with all of creation. Our very breath comes from the trees; humans and trees are engaged in a literal conspiracy (we breathe together). We breathe in what the trees breathe out—oxygen—as they breathe in—carbon dioxide—what humans and other animals breathe out. The plants and trees create oxygen as a byproduct of the miraculous act of photosynthesis, capturing living light energy and converting it into chemical energy through the air and water. Our entire existence is dependent upon the creative interplay between the living elements. And this was how we once experienced the world—as whole, complete, alive, and radically interconnected. It was not a theory; it was an everpresent reality of sacred reciprocation.

Our very thoughts were once an offering of appreciation for the wholeness and blessing of life. This is why thinking is etymologically related to the word *thanking* in many languages, including English, and also Old Saxon, Dutch, Frisian, Norse, German, French, and probably many other languages.⁴ We once universally understood that our thoughts came from Nature and that we can only achieve our full potential as human beings through giving over our personal will to the larger will of what wants to happen in Nature through us. We become more fully human when we do not restrict our consciousness to the personal.

RECLAIMING THE FULL CONTINUUM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

To be clear, I am not saying that we need to go back to the way we used to think—at least not entirely. But we must utilize the full continuum of consciousness, new and old, personal and universal, if we are to survive and prosper into the future. There is gold (buried treasure) in our living roots of consciousness. If we can recover, wash off, and utilize these interconnected and immersive ways of being in the modern world, we may avert the seemingly inevitable consequences of our current—overly abstract—worldview.

The core dilemma of modernity is that we have usurped much of the natural world, making the real into the abstract, extracting it for human use alone. The

⁴ In English, the proto-Germanic *þankaz* is the root of both thinking and thanking (or the act of giving thanks).

concept of economic growth is perhaps our most dangerous abstraction, because unlimited growth requires us to destroy what keeps us alive—trees, topsoil, water, and other natural capital. We should be preserving and protecting these precious resources, but instead we squander them to make money—doing what we call making a living—even if, in truth, it may net the opposite result.

THE FALLACY OF PROGRESS

The concept of continuous economic growth is related to another core assumption of modernity: we believe that humanity is continually progressing, always getting better and smarter (in terms of accumulating superior knowledge, technology, and so forth). Never mind that we have no idea how the Egyptians built the great pyramids, or how any of the other monolithic structures were built in the ancient world—and that we simply do not possess the technology today to cut, transport, or perfectly position such large blocks of stone. The idea of linear human progress is taken for granted.

Why is it that we see humanity progressing but not the rest of creation? All that has happened is that we have slowly withdrawn from immersive involvement in the world, shifting our attention (and our thinking) from synchronizing our activities with the rhythms of nature to doing as we pleased when we pleased. In other words, we moved from aligning with nature to mastery over nature. And it was this withdrawal from integral participation with the natural world that led to different core conceptions of thought, time, and what it means to be human.

Our thoughts originally connected us with creation—but gradually, they came to separate us. This is why Aristotle spoke of humans as the rational animal. In a similar way, time, which we once understood as unfolding in the energy of a circle mirroring the cycles of nature, became an abstraction, something unique to humans. This change occurred so slowly and surreptitiously that we hardly noticed. Our first timepieces (astrolabes, sundials, and eventually, clocks) mirrored the way the sun and other heavenly bodies moved. It is only recently that we abandoned a connection between time and the movement of the sun—which is why we now say clockwise instead of sunwise (as if clocks were wise). When we discovered how to live apart from the movement of nature, we began to imagine that we could progress apart from nature, and that time itself was a line. The entire process culminated with the invention of linear perspective in art in the early 15th century during the European Renaissance.

LINEAR PERSPECTIVE: REAL OR ABSTRACT?

The advent of linear perspective reified a dramatic change in the Western worldview, and not just in art. Linear perspective foreshadowed the development of essentially every other field to come: not only in the hard sciences, but in humanities, psychology, philosophy, and so forth. In a moment, we shall discuss some of the consequences of a post-perspectival world. But, first, let's consider why linear perspective is considered to be realistic despite the fact that its view is from a single, stationary eye, when, in reality, we have two moving, watery eyes. Linear perspective was purposely invented to create an *illusion* of a 3D world on a 2D canvas; so, why did it come to be considered realistic—of the school of “realism”?

For one, linear perspective does mimic a 3 dimensional overview of the landscape. It also offers an advantage of separating objects from each other in time and space, a precursor of rational, analytical thinking and the advent of what Newton called absolute time, or the notion of time based on intervals between things. In linear perspective, an object in the foreground appears larger and more prominent and is presumed to happen sooner, with objects in the distance representing what happens in the *distant* future.

An equally valid way of participating in the world, however, is to be in and of the world—to commune(icate) with a living world of vital energies—to touch, taste, and smell what we are immersed in: living, aware air; breathing, aware soil; vibrant, alive water; and all interconnected with an living, aware, fireball we call the Sun in the sky.

Linear perspective hides from view the things we intuitively sense when we engage with the world in a more intimate way; we can no longer see around corners or feel our involvement inside the landscape. On the other hand, perspective enables us to obtain a more abstract, objective distance from the world, and this has advantages too. Neither view provides the complete picture.

It is not simply a choice between the real and the abstract because it is not an either/or decision; it is a both/and worldview I am suggesting. Yes, we are embedded in a living universe composed of living elements and we must remember this or we will continue to destroy the Earth. At the same time, we can employ analytical, abstract thought for limited purposes, provided we remember it is not the whole truth.

THE LIVING ROOTS OF RATIONAL THOUGHT

To reclaim a wider spectrum of consciousness, we must remember the living roots of rational thought that we in the West inherited largely from ancient Greece. Significantly, the word rational originally came from “ratio,” referring to harmony and

proportion between things.⁵ For the ancient Greeks, the flowering of rational thinking was seen as the zenith of thought—but it was also considered the most *beautiful* form of thinking yet to arise. This is why the Greeks placed such an emphasis on divine proportion and sacred ratios in their art and architecture.

The ancient sense of rational implied an active engagement with nature and a recreation of that relationship in our thinking. Rational thought was an unfolding of a new way of seeing, but it was still grounded in living Nature and remained connected with the emotional and intuitive aspects of perception. Today, unfortunately, rational thinking serves to separate us from living Nature in ways that are decreasingly useful and increasingly dangerous.

In short, the post-perspectival worldview has served to remove and elevate the role of the human above the rest of the natural world. This enabled us to develop new ways of thinking that have led to great scientific advantage, but it has also disabled our prior way of seeing ourselves as immersed in a living world. Most significantly, perhaps, it has disabled our connection to the wisdom of the past and given us a distorted view of what is progress. Real progress is an unfolding of what wants to happen in nature, not merely the selfish agenda of humans.

RECONSIDERING PROGRESS

The Pope recently came to the realization that the very notion of progress must be reconsidered. In his encyclical, he wrote, “A technological and economic development that does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress.”⁶

The Pope is prescient in his concern. If we are to survive into the future, ironically, we must reconsider the notion of progress. Specifically, we have to expand the notion of progress beyond the human realm to include the natural world in which we are embedded and completely dependent upon to remain alive. Our fixation on human progress alone has created some major blind spots. We not only remove ourselves from the unfolding of nature; we seek to remove knowledge itself from nature, claiming it for human use alone. The ancients did not think like this, even in the West. Plato knew that knowledge resided in nature, and the task of the human was to remember (become whole again) through what was already there. It was only after we abandoned our trust in nature that we felt we had to accumulate knowledge for exclusively human use. Progress then ceased to be an unfolding of natural cycles, but an accumulation of abstract knowledge.

⁵ David Bohm. *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, London: Routledge. (Bohm, 1980), 26.

⁶ <http://www.ihmcatholicparish.org/pope-francis-new-encyclical-laudato-si/>

Our accumulation of knowledge yields certain dividends; I am not suggesting that we throw out everything we have learned. But we also have the ability to receive knowledge directly from nature—and it is in that revelatory knowledge where wisdom resides, including the wisdom of the ancients we have been too quick to dismiss. We abandon the timeless wisdom of the ancients because of our overconfidence in incremental human progress. Ideas of the “past” are given lip service, even pined for with nostalgia, but not seriously considered.

In truth, our whole concept of the past is a fallacy. If we can remember something, it is still here, not past. As William Faulkner said, “the past is never dead. It isn’t even past.”⁷ Yet, our rigid concept of linear progress prevents us from seeing the vitality of an ancient idea reemployed for today’s circumstances. If someone considers all of existence to be sentient and alive, for instance, this view is typically dismissed with terminology that restricts it to a bygone era—“pan-psychic” or “pantheistic” philosophies of the past.

But there is something else happening today, a hopeful development in which ancient wisdom is being remembered, even as it is repackaged as a “new idea” with new terminology. Examples of these are numerous: Gaia hypothesis; organismic philosophy, systems and holistic approaches, to name a few.

Many intelligent thinkers are clamoring for a New Story of interconnectedness between human and nature. With respect to these thinkers, it is not simply a new story we need because our fixation on the new has been integral to our problem. What we really need is to awaken to the original instructions of how to live on the planet—instructions that have always been with us, unfolding as needed in a particular era. We need only to recognize this ancient wisdom that “guides and permeates all things”—and patiently trust in the process.⁸

“All our progress is an unfolding,” Emerson wisely counseled, “like the vegetable plant. You first have an instinct, then an opinion, then a knowledge, as the plant has root, bud and fruit. Trust it to the end, though you can render no reason. It is vain to hurry it. By trusting it to the end, it shall ripen into truth, and you shall know why you believe”⁹

We are far more alike the plant than we imagine. We too are water beings, born in darkness, growing toward the light, born of the same Mother Earth and sharing her

⁷ William Faulkner. *Requiem for A Nun*. (New York: Vintage, 1975), 73.

⁸ Heraclitus, in *Fragments*, (2001). *The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus*, (Translation by Brooks Haxton), (New York: Viking, 2001), 13.

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson*. (New York, NY: Thomas & Crowell, 1926), 232-233.

consciousness. We are alive, aware, and intelligent only because Nature is alive, aware, and intelligent. We are made of the living elements, just as every other creature is.

This, in my estimation, is the true meaning of wholistic science. The original meaning of science is simply “to know” and we can know only because we are part of a larger unfolding, a larger Knowing. Our souls are nested in an Oversoul; our consciousness is an inlet to a greater Consciousness that is timeless and wise, new and old, intuitive and rational.¹⁰ Our personal consciousness has invented self-imposed obstacles that limit our vision. But we become fully human by remembering the living roots of our own Consciousness. When we do this, our hearts beat with the Heart of Nature, and all of creation rejoices.

A slightly adapted version of this article will be republished in an upcoming issue of *Holistic Science Journal* under the title: *Becoming Fully Human*.

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¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson*. (New York, NY: Thomas & Crowell, 1926), 188-211.