

## MORAL SENSITIVITY AND OUR INTERCONNECTION WITH ONE ANOTHER AND NATURE: A CONVERSATION WITH ERVIN LASZLO

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon)

### Abstract:

Riane Eisler, Editor-in-Chief of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, interviews pioneering systems philosopher, scientist, and global activist Dr. Ervin Laszlo, about his work with the late evolutionary systems scientist David Loye on moral sensitivity, evolution, and the need to move from a linear to a whole-systems approach to meet our mounting global environmental, economic, social, and personal challenges.

**Keywords:** David Loye; Systems Thinking; Moral Sensitivity; Moral Insensitivity; Interconnection; Climate Change; Partnership

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**Riane Eisler:** It is a pleasure to reconnect, Ervin. As this issue is honoring my husband David Loye's work on moral sensitivity, I want to start with what you remember from your first encounter with David.

**Ervin Laszlo:** I actually first met David through his book, *The Sphinx and the Rainbow: Brain, Mind, and Future Vision* (later reissued as *Arrow Through Chaos: How We See into the Future*). I was visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and saw it in the bookstore. It looked intriguing, so I bought it. I went outside, lay down on the grass (it was a warm summer day), and started reading. I read the whole thing,

from first page to last. That was my introduction to David. After that, I was looking for occasions to meet him.

**Eisler:** One of these occasions was a meeting of scholars from the West as well as from nations that were what was then behind the Iron Curtain: the former Soviet Union and Hungary. That meeting in Budapest explored using chaos theory and nonlinear dynamics to develop a different theory of evolution, something David was committed to in his work reinterpreting Darwin's views, especially on human evolution, and was the beginning of the General Evolution Research Group (GERG), which we later co-founded with you.

**Laszlo:** My most memorable meeting with David was in California when we were already the General Evolution Research Group and met with Dr. Jonas Salk at the Salk Institute. David was so generous and kind, and dedicated to the idea of changing how we view evolution to help build a more peaceful world.

**Eisler:** You made a wonderful comment about David's book, *Darwin's Lost Theory: Bridge to a Better World*, and how it was something that everyone needs to know about. This is what you wrote:

Darwin has been misrepresented and misunderstood: a fate not unique among great scientists and prophets. Their insights are made to serve their followers' aspiration and confirm their followers' worldview—never mind what the thinkers and prophets themselves truly had in mind. When David Loye goes after what Darwin had in mind he is not only putting right the historical record; he is *performing a crucial service in the cause of humankind*. For today we, the species that calls itself *homo sapiens sapiens*, the knowing-knower, faces its most rigorous test of intelligence: the test of viability. Can we, will we, survive on our home planet? We don't know yet, but what we do know is that the answer lies in our ability to discern the path that lies ahead for evolution. David Loye lights that path for us, and for that we owe him a

profound depth of gratitude – one we can best repay by comprehending what he has discovered, and acting on it. Doing so is in our most vital and immediate interest.

In his work on Darwin, David emphasized the importance of what he called moral sensitivity, as contrasted with moral insensitivity or moralism, which is still so rampant in our world today. He wrote extensively about this, including “Untangling Partnership and Domination Morality,” an article in this journal, (<https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/ijps/article/view/91>). Could you give us your thoughts on that?

**Laszlo:** I think moral sensitivity is a key issue. We are totally insensitive to the fact that we are going way beyond the bounds of what is a healthy and cooperative and sustainable world, always just favoring the part at the expense of the rest of the whole. David’s emphasis on moral sensitivity, and even on love, is vital and, as he noted, it is connected to Darwin’s extensive writings on love. I think this has been proven right. There’s more and more work, especially from quantum biologists and population biologists, showing that the world (ecosystems, species systems, population systems) cannot function unless they are closely cooperative. And this is so not only for humans; there is a case for moral sensitivity in animals and other species. It’s an instinctive response. Animals may perceive instinctively that they are part of a larger ecosystem, without verbalizing, without conceptualizing. But we humans conceptualize—we try to understand the universe. When we have a good understanding, it comes down to the understanding that we are connected—that we are not alone, we are together—and that what is good for us is good for the whole system, for all of us together. What binds us together is love. Love, which is the key not only to thriving, but to surviving. This is a very key notion coming more and more to be recognized and accepted. David Loye’s work is an essential part of this movement, and it’s going to be more and more recognized, I’m sure, in the coming years.

**Eisler:** Yes, and we have to ensure that it is more recognized, because we are in such need of a completely different story about what being human really means.

**Laszlo:** Indeed, indeed.

**Eisler:** Ervin, because you have done so much work in this area of moral sensitivity, how can we make people more aware of their interconnection?

**Laszlo:** When I try to make it understandable and acceptable to natural scientists, even to physicists, I talk about an attractor that acts to bring us together to create a movement toward integration and coherence among parts of a complex, multivariant system. This attractor, I think, is what is expressed intuitively in people, especially young people, as love. I am talking about a special kind of love: the unconditional and universal love for all things. Not love that expects to receive something in exchange, but love because we feel ourselves being part of others. That's a completely different mindset, a different paradigm, a different sensitivity. We can thank David for calling attention to moral sensitivity. What is right and what is wrong is not purely an abstract intellectual issue. It's what we feel when we are healthy. We feel our oneness with all that is nature, is the ecology, is the planet. We then see that when we are fragmented and separated, we are not healthy anymore—we suffer from the disease of separateness.

**Eisler:** I agree with you so much, and so did David. Yet it is a challenge. I'd like to hear your thoughts on how to help people think in terms of systems, of Interconnection, rather than in terms of simple linear causes and effects. How something that happens in a distant place, like the flapping of the wings of a butterfly, can have an effect on the whole system. How do we make people more aware of this?

**Laszlo:** Practically, our species' survival depends on becoming aware of it and following it. We have been brainwashed into thinking linearly between single items, with Item A

connected to Item B, and while we can pursue this, it never allows us to grasp the complexity and the sensitivity of the whole system. A living system is so complex and so interactive in all its elements that we cannot map it in terms of linear interactions. We have to look at the whole system and find the characteristics, the features that make it whole, that make it act, and to see how the system can evolve, how it can grow in conjunction and cooperation with other systems around it. This is the basis of life—evolve or perish, as you yourself have said many times. Evolution is a law of nature, just as is love following our moral sensitivity, and expressing ourselves as loving, kindness, oneness. These are factors that people can grasp intuitively, that recognize our survival imperatives.

**Eisler:** How do you see the role of scholars, both from the natural and social sciences, in this?

**Laszlo:** Scholars are not exempt from responsibility. In the comment attributed to Gandhi, be the change that you want to see in the world. If scholars—cosmologists and physicists and others—really want to do something positive in the world, they themselves have to begin to change in line with what they discover about the world. Climate scientists know that the world is an interconnected whole that cannot be separated, that separateness is an illusion. We now know this from the quantum sciences, that there is no separateness, there is no absolute boundary between one system and other systems around it. There are only gradients; some interconnections are not as close, but the interconnections are there at all levels. Your work, together with David's, is Partnership Studies, and that work highlights the fact that we are partners in life, in existence, partners with all other human beings. Partners, of course as men and women, which you have been championing and showing, partners with all forms of life. All people on Earth are together in this same boat, in a boat that we can only keep afloat if we all get together, with care and concern for each other, and for the world around us. Partnership, yes, partnership with all life on Earth is ultimately the criterion. Anything less than that will create conflict and competition, and ultimately lead to increases in chaos, and to less and less coherence. If we want to have

a coherent world, we need to have a loving world. And it's in us. Fortunately, I'm not asking for something that's artificial, that we have to learn. We ourselves embody that love in ourselves—that makes us human, that makes us live. On the human level, we can express it, we can feel it. But it is universal. Some philosophers, especially Alfred North Whitehead, talked about this. Moral sensitivity originates in such a feeling, in one's consciousness of all the other entities, all the other consciousnesses around us.

**Eisler:** One of the problems that scholars, especially scholars in universities, face is how siloed, how separate, universities make each discipline. As you know, David's work, my work, like your work, is interdisciplinary—it's transdisciplinary. I think that these academic silos are such an obstacle, because the reward system is still for working within a particular silo of a particular discipline. Do you have some thoughts on how we can change that aspect, that makes it very hard for scholars to see interconnections?

**Laszlo:** I think there's only one institution in the western world that is more conservative and more difficult to change than universities. And that institution is organized religion. So having received the diploma, the sheepskin, as they say, I decided to work beyond the university. I did my job as an associate professor, then a full professor, then an eminent professor, etc. When I retired, I left the academic world, and I'm not going back to it; I can do much more outside. Right now I'm involved in setting up a postgraduate institution called the Upshift Academy, with the assistance of Kyung Hee University in Seoul, Korea. This Academy could act as a university, as a graduate institution, but it is not constrained. It receives its financial assistance and organizational skills and personnel from a university, but the members of the Upshift Academy are unconstrained as much as possible by these considerations. Upshift is a term that I espouse, and I'm promoting it in my books and talks: the idea of an evolutionary movement forward, shifting, but in the evolutionary direction.

**Eisler:** That's the direction we need to go in. Are there ways we at the *Interdisciplinary Journal for Partnership Studies* can participate in this?

**Laszlo:** I will draw on you and your partners and your associates. Because partnership is a very basic notion, it includes, to my mind, the love we have for each other. All the cells in our bodies, all the organs in our bodies, are coherent with each other. That means they are attracted to each other. You might say they love each other. It's a metaphor, but it's a good metaphor, I think, and your work and David's work in partnership studies exemplifies this. It needs to spread in the world—it needs to be understood.

**Eisler:** My most recent book with Douglas Fry, *Nurturing our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape our Brains, Lives, and Future*, draws from findings from neuroscience which show that the so-called pleasure centers of our brains light up more when we share and care than when we win and dominate. So evolution equips us to understand, and act on, our interconnection. But we have to create the social structures, including of course the teaching structures, starting in early childhood, that help people understand this. That is the work ahead—it is fundamental to the upshift in evolution.

**Laszlo:** I think David always believed in that; it's what we talked about, this notion of shifting together to the next level of our evolutionary voyage. I think it's implicit in what you're doing, and I'm trying to make it explicit in what I'm doing, because it's essential to know that we are not part of a passive, impersonal universe. We are part of an evolutionary universe, and everything that joins it—everything that is a positive, constructive part of it—is interdependent, and is acting together. It's even evolving together. That, I think, is a message you can get from the study of social interactions, to overcome the idea that you can just study or do one thing at a time. That's the lesson for those who want to separate things, to cut things to pieces and then examine each piece by itself. You won't get anywhere with that. We tried it; it doesn't disclose the dynamics of the system. Ours is an interdependent system, which we cannot understand as an ensemble of separate or separable parts. There is no such thing in the real world.

One must be blind not to see that this is one world where everything, everybody is involved. Everyone is involved in a pandemic, everybody's involved in global warming, in climate changes. A local war in Ukraine has global consequences; practically all nations of the world are involved in one way or another.

**Eisler:** Thank you, Ervin. David actually showed in one of his last books, *Rediscovering Darwin: The Rest of Darwin's Theory and Why We Need It Today*, that Darwin foreshadowed chaos theory, and even self-organizing theory; he wrote that organisms don't just adapt, that they're also creators. Especially we humans. We initiate—and that's something really important, isn't it?

**Laszlo:** Yes, this is so important. We need to remember that we can be initiators and creators.

**Eisler:** I so agree, and want to thank you very much, not only for this conversation, but also for your work. You're ahead of so much in the world today.

**Laszlo:** I too enjoyed talking with you. Again I want to note that the ideas of systems, of chaos theory, of evolution, are more relevant today than ever before. And the same goes for partnership, for oneness among people. Thank you for the great work that you're doing. It's always a pleasure and a privilege to talk with you.

### **Suggested Readings**

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Ervin Laszlo, PhD, is a pioneering systems philosopher, scientist, and global activist; editor *World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution*; co-founder of the General Evolution Research Group (GERG) and the Club of Budapest; author of *Evolution: The General Theory*; *The Connectivity Hypothesis: Foundations of an Integral Science of Quantum, Cosmos, Life, and Consciousness*; *You Can Change the World: The Global Citizen's Handbook for Living on Planet Earth*; and *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything*.

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