

**EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS:
VISION AND VALUES FOR A WORLD OF INSURMOUNTABLE
OPPORTUNITIES**

Alexander Laszlo

EGADE/ITESM, Av. Fundadores, 66269 Garza García, N.L. Mexico

alexander@itesm.mx

Syntony Quest, 810-A Quarry Road, San Francisco, CA 94129

ABSTRACT

One of the great leaders of Mexico, President Benito Juárez, once said, “El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz” — respect for other’s rights is peace. Such an understanding of peace carries with it a distinctive intentional connotation, an appreciation of which is necessary for an orderly transition from a materialistic, ego- and nation-state centered world to a global civilization where all can live and thrive in dynamic interdependent coexistence. In fact, an ethic based on concern and respect for all people in the human family, as well as for its life-supporting environment, is a precondition of respect for world peace.

Societies all around the world are currently experiencing a period of rapid and extensive transformation, certain facets of which involve integration toward greater globalization while others involve dissolution toward increased factionalism. In this age of interconnectedness and interrelatedness, the environmental and demographic challenges facing humanity are of equal measure to the opportunities for meeting them. New ways of living in harmony with each other and the planet are emerging – ways that offer a path for all people in the global community to live in dignity and freedom, without destroying each other's chances of livelihood, culture, society and environment. Clearly, action steps are urgently needed to meet the contemporary challenge of change, but the type of action and the ideals that inform it will make the difference between a world of crisis and chaos and one of balance and alignment with nature. An "evolutionary ethic" is the moral and psychological foundation for an orderly transition to a global civilization, just as the structures and provisions of world peace are the relational and sociological foundation for this epochal step. This paper defines the nature of an evolutionary planetary ethic, considers its origins and the chances of its timely spread in contemporary society.

Keywords: Evolution, ethics, development, sustainability, learning society

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TAKING STOCK

Even a cursory glance at the impact humankind is having on the life support systems of planet Earth makes patent the unsustainability of contemporary cultures of individualism and self-entitlement. Creating a new culture through an ethic adapted to our time is not a quest of foolish arrogance – it is the survival imperative for sustainable co-existence of humankind with planet Earth. Societies all around the world are currently experiencing a period of rapid and extensive transformation. The signs of change are pervasive, and the rate of change is itself changing and accelerating, speeding contemporary societies toward a critical threshold of stability and engulfing the individual in a confusing blur of behavioral choice. On the one hand we are witnessing global flows of information, energy, trade, and technology swept up in massive economic reforms and political reorientations. On the other, and in no small measure due to the magnitude and intensity of these flows, we are experiencing climatological and ecological maelstroms that are altering the physical essence of our planet. The resulting turbulence of these dynamics creates a disorienting and disrupting vortex of social, cultural, technological, and ecological change on both local and global levels. And yet our evolution, our developmental history as an emerging planetary species, has prepared us to meet the challenge of surviving these crises. The question is whether we will rise to the occasion, and if we do, the extent to which we will barely survive them or find ways of transforming them into opportunities for thriving on this one wild and precious planet we call home.

CLOSER CONSIDERATION

Economic and cultural integration in North America and Western Europe; social and political transformation in Eastern Europe, The Middle East, Africa, India, Pakistan, and China; human caused global climate change; declining levels of biodiversity and ecosystem viability; changes in the migration patterns of both human and animal populations — these are not isolated phenomena: they are organic elements in the dominant pattern of our times. Interestingly enough, this pattern also manifests countervailing dynamics, such as social innovations that focus on quality of life and local community initiatives that emphasize self-directed sustainable development on the one hand, and breakthroughs in technologies that promise increased efficiencies and means of harnessing renewable energy sources on the other. Nevertheless, the common feature is the transition that virtually every part of the world is going through. Some of the more visible effects of this transition include indebtedness and financial crisis in the Third World, geo-political and instability associated with international initiatives stemming from the First World, and urban, food, and environmental crises in all three “worlds.”

Are all these changes part of a normal course of societal evolution, or are we in a fundamentally different phase of development as we round out the first decade of a new millennium? I don't think this is normal. Humanity is transiting into a new kind of society, one that is as different from the society we leave behind as the grasslands were from the caves, and the settled villages of antiquity were from life in nomadic tribes. The

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society we are leaving is the nationally based industrial society created at the dawn of the first industrial revolution — the society toward which we are heading is an interconnected socio-economic system created by the growing impact of information, the globalization of business and government, and the ever greater demands on an increasingly over-burdened and fragile terrorme.

The evolution of far-reaching social structures with powerful technologies has changed the surface of the earth. But such advance has also tended to reinforce social inequities, political stresses, and unreflective uses of technology in ways that polarize humanity and degrade nature, creating problems of global dimension. Global warming, the attenuation of the ozone shield, the menace of deforestation and desertification, the destruction of many species of flora and fauna, the extensive pollution of air, water and soil, and the poisoning of the food chain are threats that all societies now share in common. These are the characteristics of our current problematique — they represent the dangers to be averted and the opportunities to be seized upon in the global transition in which we find ourselves at the dawn of the new millennium. To act in syntony with sustainable evolutionary dynamics, we need to have recourse to a better compass by which to guide societal development.

Ethical inquiry needs to be dedicated to the exploration of evolutionary consciousness from a transdisciplinary perspective. This calls for the intensive and extensive exploration of the evolution of consciousness as the ontological basis upon which to cultivate conscious evolution. As such, the new inquiry needs be both informed by, and in service to, a transcendent evolutionary paradigm (i.e., not one bound by any disciplinarily derived axiology of evolution, nor by any one theoretician or theory of evolution). The objective of such inquiry is to foment the emergence of a meta-evolutionary ethical paradigm, and to cultivate evolutionarily informed anticipatory democracy toward the betterment of our collective chances for evolution with distinction – rather than risk unwitting devolution to extinction. The result of such a future oriented, life affirming, opportunity increasing transdisciplinary pragmtism would be an actionable evolutionary ethic; one able to guide human societal change efforts through an evolutionary praxis that places human affairs in the context of planetary sustainability. This is the shape of the ethical compass that is being wrought of Evolutionary Systems Design.

CONVERSATION AS FUTURE CREATION

We need not be victims of change, destined for one future or another according to either a predetermined plan or random chaos. Both individually and collectively, we can learn how to have change happen through us, not to us! But we must find out how to look, listen, and learn – to really see and hear and understand the underlying patterns of change so that we can distinguish between those dynamics that are destabilizing and those that forward sustainable futures. The sharp discontinuity between where we – as not the most unobtrusive species on Earth – are going and where we should be going is underscored by the need for new ways of thinking, new ways of learning and new ways of conversing.

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Lester W. Milbrath (1989) notes in his book, *Envisioning a Sustainable Society: Learning Our Way Out*, that

As a society, we have to learn better how to learn – I call it social learning; it is the dynamism for change that could lead us to a new kind of society that will not destroy itself from its own excesses... for we must share a vision for a new society before we can realize it. Designing a better society and maintaining a good life require deep thought and sustained effort by all of us. Reasoning together is the only way we can bring it about. (pp. 6 & 1)

Reasoning together, conversing together, designing together, evolving together. The challenge is nothing short of the collective consideration of a radical transformation of the social systems, which embody our attitudes and dispositions. “Our goal,” as Milbrath saw it more than two decades ago, “will be to design a new society that provides a decent quality of life while coexisting in a long-run sustainable relationship with the natural environment that nourishes it” (ibid., xi). Not only is this goal entirely relevant to current design conversations around the world, it has taken on increased in urgency as the years have passed. Indeed, it must no longer be considered a side conversation, relegated to conferences and classrooms. This is The Conversation for being and becoming with our world.

When we engage in conversation with each other, if we do so authentically and inclusively, we end up also conversing internally – with ourselves, as well as externally – with the more-than-human world of which we are a part. Through multi-faceted reflection on where we stand, where those who surround us stand, and where we would like to be, we are brought inexorably to a consideration of our ethics. We may find that we and our dearest (and not so dear) acquaintances tend to be more of the take-make-waste worldview than of the syntony-quest worldview. Although, as we will see, this may be neither pleasant nor reassuring, such awareness marks the first step toward transcendence. Here, at the threshold of conscious evolution and the capacity to creatively contribute to evolutionary consonance, we need to step back, take a look at what is happening in the “big picture,” and find ourselves somewhere there. How are we contributing to that big picture? Are we over there with those who are heedlessly stamping down this earth, or over here, with the mindful walkers and insightful listeners?

Carolyn Merchant (in Hinman, 1996, p. 516), author of *Environmental Ethics and Political Conflict*, distinguishes among three approaches to environmental ethics:

An egocentric ethic is grounded in the self and based on the assumption that what is good for the individual is good for society. A homocentric ethic is grounded in society and based on the assumption that policies should reflect the greatest good for the greatest number of people and that, as stewards of the natural world, humans should conserve and protect nature for human benefit. An ecocentric ethic is grounded in the cosmos, or whole environment, and is based on the assignment of intrinsic value to nonhuman nature. This threefold taxonomy may be useful in identifying underlying ethical assumptions in cases where ethical dilemmas and

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conflicts of interest develop among entrepreneurs, government agencies, and environmentalists.

There is also a fourth stage, a truly transcendent and evolutionary level of ethical consideration that should serve as the basis for the self-directed sustainable change efforts of a self-reflective global species such as ours. It is what I have been referring to in this paper as **evolutionary ethics**. Without a doubt, ecocentric ethics is a highly evolved expression of human consciousness given that it assigns intrinsic value to “the whole environment, including inanimate elements, rocks, and minerals along with animate plants and animals” (Merchant in Hinman, 1996, p. 524). But it is still synchronic, considering “the big picture” only at any one point in time. An evolutionary perspective needs to infuse this ethic to make it truly sustainable in the long run. Otherwise it is just optimizing what is, not working in stewardship of what should be.

Years ago, C.H. Waddington anticipated the challenge for conversations based in an evocentric ethic. He pointed out that

we have found ourselves faced by a series of problems – atomic warfare, the population explosion, the food problem, energy, natural resources, pollution and so on – each complex enough in itself, but then it turns out that each of these is only one aspect of, as it were a Total Problem, in which all aspects of the world’s workings are inter-related. (in Merry, 1995, p. 78)

This is what others, such as the Club of Rome, have termed the global problematique, and as Waddington suggests, it must be considered as a continually unfolding condition. An ecocentric ethic simply will not bear up to the challenge of dealing with it (much less a homocentric ethic, while an egocentric ethic can only make it worse). The time is nigh for societal design conversations based on an evocentric ethic.

CONCLUSION

Imagine what it would be like to flow the universe – to live in harmony with Planet Earth and to consciously and ethically explore our human potential. To be so attuned to the warp and weft of the dynamics of change that every thought, action and inaction contributed to the emergence of life affirming, future creating, opportunity increasing relationships - consciously, purposefully, and yet effortlessly, naturally. This is the promise of the next stage in the conscious evolution of our species. To attain it, and to experience such complete consonance with the flow of life in what Teilhard de Chardin would have called an experience of syntony, requires a new ethic, and a new process to cultivate its emergence.

Like all forms of truly creative and life-affirming societal evolution, the fostering of an emergent evolutionary ethic through design conversation can only be done in relationship - with oneself, with others, with nature, and with the potential inherent in the bridge we represent between what has been and what is yet to be. And it involves training - and

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practice. Lots of practice, even though learning to develop your syntony sense is more like learning how to love than it is like following a manual of instructions for how to do anything in particular.

- ⊙ At the first level - syntony with oneself; personal or internal syntony - the practices involve centering, quieting the monkey-mind, listening with every cell of our being. These practices cultivate intuition, compassion, insight that matches oversight, and a willingness to explore and follow our deepest calling.
- ⊙ At the second level - syntony with others; community or interpersonal syntony - the practice involves deep dialogue and collaboration. Coming together to learn with and from each other and to engage in collective action with empathy, considerateness, openness, and joy.
- ⊙ At the third level - syntony with nature; ecosystemic or transpersonal syntony - the practices involve communing; listening to the messages of all beings (whether they be waterfalls, animals, mountains or galaxies) and acknowledging our interdependence and ultimate unity.
- ⊙ At the fourth level - syntony with the flows of being and becoming; evolutionary or integral syntony - the practices involve learning how to read the patterns of change of which we are a part; learning how to hear the rhythms of life and becoming familiar with the improvisational jam session that nature has been playing since time immemorial. These practices cultivate our ability to play our own piece; to sing and dance our own path into existence in harmony with the grand patterns of cosmic creation.

Integral responses to the complexity of contemporary global and local challenges – personal, organizational, planetary – require an expanded perspective: a way of recognizing interconnections, of perceiving wholes and parts, of acknowledging processes and structures, of blending apparent opposites. But most important, they require collaboration. Individual solutions and breakthrough ideas are necessary but not sufficient. Real opportunity to affect change arises from the systemic synergies that we create together. The Club of Rome coined the term "global problematique" to describe the complex entanglement of the collective challenges we face at any given point in time. It is our task to create "solutionatiques" – systems of shared solutions that arise from the genius of each person. To do so, we need to create an ecology of new ways of working, learning and living that embody social and environmental integrity. In short, we must learn to design systems of syntony.

Our evolutionary trajectory has prepared us for this moment in history. We have the cognitive and emotional capacity to embark on this quest for syntony. The question is whether or not we have the will, the vision, and the conviction to do so.

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