
ECOLOGY, LEARNING & SPIRITUALITY: A PERSPECTIVE

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Relating and sustaining the inner and outer dimensions of humans

There is an area of learning that is vital to human sustainability, well-being and development. It is to understand the relationship in our lives between the outer world - ecological and social - on which we physically depend, and our personal and collective inner worlds of meaning and value through which we make sense of everything we experience and on which we depend emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. This conviction that has been with me as long as I can remember and has grown stronger with time.

Today, I wish to say something about the importance of learning - and to share some questions that I have been asking myself for many years about the relationship between learning, ecology and spirituality.

Why, for example, do people seem increasingly concerned with these topics today? What does it mean for human beings to 'fit' appropriately into the ecological scheme of things, to find their place in it? What part do our capacities for choice, innovation and self-consciousness play in ensuring ecological sustainability given our highly developed ability to convince ourselves that we somehow exist independently from the rest of nature? And how does spiritual development relate to all this? Our human capacity for learning is, as far as we know, more sophisticated and creative (and destructive) than any other being in the universe. So, how can we use it wisely?

These are some of the questions we are working on at the Grubb Institute. And because we work in organisational development and consultancy, we are also

concerned with showing how, and why, such questions are important in business, policy-making and other ‘hard-nosed’ arenas. Over the last 30 years or so, the Institute - and particularly Bruce Reed, the founder - has sought to understand why people experience an overwhelming need in their lives for meaningfulness and an equally strong desire to express it through their work and action. We use the term *Oscillation* process (Reed, 1978 and 1996; Maiteny and Reed, 1998) to describe the essential experience of seeking meaning and expression as felt by all human beings, though manifesting in different ways. The *oscillation* is the continual movement in human life between engaging with everyday problems of survival, work and creative living, and disengaging to contemplate experience in light of the basic meanings and values that a person seeks to express through their activities. By being aware of their oscillations, human beings are enabled to take responsibility for the sustainability and development of their meanings and expressions by holding them in continual tension. The *oscillation* therefore connects ‘inner’ dimensions of sustainability and development - psychological, emotional and spiritual - with ‘outer’ dimensions - ecological, social and organisational. More material on this is available direct from the Grubb Institute.

Ken Wilber (1996) offers a helpful framework (Fig. 1) for understanding the inner and outer, individual and collective dimensions of human beings (and any ‘system’).

	interior	exterior
individual	intentional subjective psychological experiential.....	behavioural objective biological material.....
collective	meaningful (inter)subjective cultural/symbolic.....	expressive (inter)objective social/ecological.....

Fig. 1: The dimensions of human beings showing some of their qualities (adapted from Wilber, 1996)

There is no escaping the fact that human beings have evolved biologically in a collective ecological and social context. *All* our capacities - including self-conscious awareness, learning, experience and our ability to construct complex symbols to make sense of our experiences - all these have emerged out of millions of years of natural, cosmic processes.

Paradoxically, these very capacities have the potential to undermine the fundamental life-support systems from which they have emerged and, most importantly, on which they depend for their continued existence and evolution.

This may be why human consciousness has been thought of as *fallen* consciousness. It is a double-edged sword. Evolution struck a new octave with the self-conscious human species - which, as we experience, has a profound awareness of separateness. With humans, the dimension of conscious choice entered evolution to a greater degree than ever before - choice based on knowledge and understanding but, above all, on meanings and values which shape how we use and respond to our knowledge of the world.

For Kabbalists, the purpose of human life is to help the Divine to know itself by becoming the Mirror in which it can see a reflection of its own Divinity in the total experience of humanity (Halevi, 1979). This is the opportunity that self-awareness offers. A self-aware being, however, has freedom of choice and there is nothing, other than ourselves, to prevent us from abusing the 'creation' from which we have emerged. Our ability to respond - our 'response-ability' - may lead us to choices and actions that support or undermine nature's 'ability' to sustain us. Similarly, we are quite capable of creating situations that also undermine our inner sustainability and the beliefs and stories we require - religious, political, scientific and others - to help us make sense of our experience and, therefore, to 'find' meaning and value in our lives.

Many stories that used to serve such a purpose have been delegitimised in our society. Contemporary science, for example, has little place for subjective experience, meaningfulness and belief in human life, and has consequently delegitimised religio-spiritual beliefs and activities. This says more about the current 'story' of science and its assumptions than about the validity of subjectivity. Facts never speak for themselves. They must always be framed and interpreted according to meanings and values. That society is riven with anxiety as people seek, and often cannot find, satisfactory meaning and value in 'legitimate' forms, demonstrates the need to rehabilitate subjectivity and for natural science to grasp this particular nettle rather than avoid it. This is, of course, beginning to happen - at Schumacher College, for example, and a growing number of places (see, for example, Bortoft, 1996; Goodwin, 1994). In the human sciences, the Grubb Institute has been working with subjectivity and experience for a great many years.

The human yearning for satisfaction - the experience of 'in-needness' in *oscillation* terms - is rooted in biology, as with any other animal. All animals need food, water, air, shelter, social relations with others of their kind, and viable ecological life-support systems. A squirrel, as far as we know, seeks to fulfil squirrel needs. It is driven by its instinctive 'desire' for survival and reproduction. Humans share the same instincts. But 'in-needness' is experienced in other ways too by humans. We cannot experience - and therefore cannot know - what the squirrel equivalent of emotional, intellectual or spiritual satisfaction might mean. But we do know that

humans experience 'in-needness' in ways that cannot be satisfied by biological or social means alone. Try as we might to find fulfilment - a sense of completeness or wholeness - through consuming goods and services from outside, we know from experience that we will not ultimately find it there. Yet this is what the consumerist mythology tells us. This presents big problems for ecological sustainability. We have the capacity and technology to create ever more elaborate products and services - new outlets and objects for our in-needness - all of which, we believe, promise to satisfy our desires once and for all, 'if only we could have them!' Of course, they never do. The conviction that they will, however, drives consumerism and, therefore, resource depletion, pollution, extinction and the general assault on life-support systems.

The psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, pointed out that no sooner do we possess our object of desire than it becomes an ordinary object. The promise is broken, and desire passes on to a new object. Marketers know that no product will ever satisfy in-needness and they have a word for it - goods 'satisfice', they never ultimately satisfy.

The fantasy that in-needness can be satisfied from outside is incredibly seductive and can take subtle, even pseudo-spiritual forms - what Chogyam Trungpa describes as 'spiritual materialism'.

Our desires, through the objects we are creating to satisfice them, are inflicting massive damage on the ecological and social life-support systems we depend on. In most of the natural world, consumption and competitiveness are necessary if *individuals* are to survive. But the same drive in the human world is leading us to *collective* destruction. This is the drive - arguably, quite natural - that is directing so much of our learning today. That precious human capacity for complex learning is being overwhelmingly applied to creating new 'satisficing' products. What a waste of learning!

The paradox that a biologically rooted drive is undermining its own biological roots is poignantly summarised in the conclusion to a BBC TV documentary shown in 1992 entitled 'Prisoners of the Sun':

The Prison of the Sun created diversity. Every inmate's instinctive impulse to grow created diversity. Then, when one creature discovered alien energy (fossil fuels) and overwhelmed all the others, growth itself began to threaten diversity. And even though we can see what's happening and understand it, our populations and economics keep growing anyway. And we call growth Good. We blindly follow the same path an antelope or hyena follows. Even the most powerful of the other animals have limits. But we don't, and that's why we're a threat to everything else. There is a solution, and it's simple and obvious. We have to impose limits of our own. We have to cut back on energy - choose to slow down. Stop

growing. Stop growing? This is a shocking suggestion! Ask anyone. The idea's unthinkable. But why? Are our natural instincts just too strong?

It may seem a strange and counter-intuitive suggestion to suggest that, if physical growth is rooted in instinct, then it becomes necessary for humans to use their (naturally endowed) capacities to override other aspects of their natures to ensure their collective survival. We have to choose different ways of satisfying the drive to consume and grow which we share with other animals.

Learning for in-needness and sustainability

The materialist-consumerist story is not up to the challenge of in-needness. Whilst seeking some form of betterment and improvement - which surely relates to the purpose of learning - it has brought us to our current unsustainable situation. We have learned our way into this situation so we can hardly claim that learning is *inherently* good or progressive. We do need to ask, however, whether we can know - or foresee - whether learning is contributing to long-term human development or to destructiveness or misery. Is this just a matter of opinion or preference?

It is popular to believe today that 'truth' can only be in the eye of the beholder; that it is always relative and that all beliefs and ideas are as valid and sound as each other. This view does prevent some imposing their biases and values on others, which is important, but it also risks falling into its own trap. Its absolute 'truth' is that all truth is relative! This could be used to justify practically anything.

Is it really the case that a belief or view of the world that self-destructively undermines the capacity of nature to sustain humans is as valid as one that supports it? The word 'development' implies 'unfolding of potential' but in today's belief supermarket it can be a bewildering task to discern which beliefs are likely to promote this in the long-term and which are not. How, then, can we learn our way towards development that is more promising in terms of both human in-needness and ecological sustainability?

The materialist worldview is only *one* possible version, or cultural construction, by which humans can make sense of their world, their place within it, and seek to satisfy their in-needness. All mythologies and stories, *including* the materialist-consumerist - are generated from within. The fact that they are 'inner' activities does not make them less 'real'. We have shown ourselves how innovative we can be outwardly through

industrial production, pollution and so on. But learning for sustainable human development and evolution requires more inner-directedness.

We need to learn how to nurture a more satisfying experience of meaningfulness than that offered by consumerism. This means spiritual learning - not just intellectual or emotional. If we reduce the extent to which we seek the answer to in-needness through the phantom of material things, the knock-on effect is that pressures on ecological systems inevitably diminish. Meaning and purpose come from elsewhere - from the experience of connectedness and unity which all inner spiritual traditions and their practitioners describe. If we experience this, we inevitably come to realise that individual survival is impossible without collective survival and ecological sustainability. This awareness is not the same as intellectual or emotional appreciation, though it encompasses them.

It could be argued that to become meaningfully aware of our connectedness with, and dependence on, the natural world, on other people and on the cosmos - deliberately, consciously and at a deep level inside ourselves - goes against certain of our biological drives. If this is not the case, why are there not more people striving for it? We have to *choose* to take this path and *learn* how to tread it. We have to believe it is worth the effort. The fight to survive as an individual is biologically driven. But awareness of the need for collective survival is a process of conscious choice.

Of course, awareness on its own is not enough. It amounts to nothing if not expressed through work and action in the outside world. On the other hand, action devoid of meaning is empty. Looking around us, we can see a fair amount of both in contemporary society. Meister Eckhart, the 13th century Christian mystic, speaks of 'going out while remaining within' - to maintain a healthy dynamic between inner work and its expression or realisation in the outside world (Smith, 1987). This is also central to the *oscillation* dynamic we are exploring at the Grubb Institute.

The argument can be summed up in the following way:

Human beings have emerged from, and could not exist without, biological and ecological processes. Self-aware consciousness is the hallmark of human beings. It gives us the capacity for complex choices. We have the choice to construct ourselves as autonomous and wholly self-reliant or as dependent on relations with nature and each other. We can shape our futures in the way we see fit. This may or may not 'fit' with the necessities of existence. We can choose to see ourselves as 'gods' and make the world in our image or, as the Kabbalists would say, to work towards realising our potential as the mirror of the Divine. So far as we know, we are the only 'corner' of the cosmos that is capable of doing this.

The following moving description of the human context, responsibility and potential is by the biologist, Julian Huxley (1957).

As a result of a thousand years of evolution, the universe is becoming conscious of itself, able to understand something of its past history and its possible future. This cosmic self-awareness is being realized in one tiny fragment of the universe - in a few of us human beings. Perhaps it has been realized elsewhere too, through the evolution of conscious living creatures on the planets of other stars. But on this, our planet, it has never happened before...It is thus part of human destiny to be the necessary agent of the cosmos in understanding more of itself, in bearing witness to its wonder, beauty, and interest, in creating new aids to and mechanisms for existence, in experiencing itself, and so introducing the cosmos to more new and more valuable experiences.

Neither earth nor cosmos will grieve if we cannot rise to this challenge. They would continue to evolve and develop where they left off before we humans came along. As a species, however, we would have failed to fulfil our potential - of making the conscious evolutionary transformation of which we are capable.

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