

Placing the Ecological Crisis in a Broader Context: The Orphic and the Promethean

David A. Pittaway

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2342-0721>

Nelson Mandela University

pittaway@gmail.com

Abstract

The historical prevalence of Promethean characteristics such as dominion and domination has resulted in a dispensation where exclusive pragmatism and habitual perception have steered human actions in directions that have resulted in an unprecedented ecological crisis. Christianity, reductionist science, pragmatic technology, and capitalism have homogenised discursive arenas, limiting the extent to which one can exercise negative freedom, and making ecological degradation unavoidable as a consequence of Promethean progress. Mechanisms exist that prevent changes toward ecologically-sensitive attitudes from rooting and spreading as remedies to Promethean attitudes. Alternative, Orphic attitudes, theories, and movements do exist, and they offer something of a response to Promethean attitudes underpinning the ecological crisis. Permaculture offers a down to earth, context-bound approach to establishing Orphic systems, while philosophy in two specific formats are tools to further broaden the context of the ecological crisis. These philosophical formats are, first, Badiou and Žižek’s outline of the role of philosophy “in the present,” and second, Pierre Hadot’s work on philosophy as a way of life. From the first, it is clear that philosophy cannot confine itself to humanity as it has been historically constituted, which implies that it cannot confine itself to the realm of the Promethean, which has dominated Western history. From the second, philosophy as a way of life entails a breakaway from Promethean, utilitarian, and habitual perception, and aligns itself with an Orphic form of consciousness.

Keywords: positive and negative freedom; shapers of discourse; pragmatism and utilitarianism; permaculture; dialectical process; philosophy in the present; philosophy as a way of life; Promethean; Orphic

Introduction: Freedom in “ACID”

In the year 1859 John Stuart Mill saw his book *On Liberty* published. In it he points out the importance of experiments of living (2003, 122): “As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different



Phronimon

<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/Phronimon>

Volume 19 | 2018 | #4508 | 16 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/4508>

Online ISSN 2413-3086

© The Author(s) 2018



Published by Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when anyone thinks fit to try them.” Mill’s position could not be clearer: if you do not hurt anybody else in your endeavours, then you should be free to think and do whatever you like. This sums up the concept of negative freedom or negative liberty: “One has negative liberty ... when there is an absence of external interferences to one’s doing what one wishes—specifically, when there is an absence of external interferences *by other people*” (Zwolinski 2018, original emphasis). Mill was concerned that the tyranny of the majority—or rather, that the tyranny of those “who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority” (2003, 75)—was eroding people’s individuality and freedoms in the negative sense to which I have just drawn attention. Freedom increasingly was becoming positive freedom, where “one has the opportunity and ability to do what one wishes” (Zwolinski 2018), but where the opportunities are invariably delineated by dominant institutions or organisations. One has positive liberty when one has the opportunity and ability to do what has been deemed as acceptable to do by the state or some other institution, organisation, or dominant societal, political, economic or attitudinal force. Part of Mill’s project in *On Liberty* was to situate the broad concepts of liberty and freedom on a spectrum and thereby emphasise that not all liberties and freedoms are equal—for example, that which a person does “freely” under endorsement from a historically dominant institution (such as state, church, and economically influential entity) is not the same kind of liberty as the freedom to do whatever one pleases and be left alone so long as one does not injure another person.

It is not necessary to become reflectively engaged in the normative ethical activity of asking whether or not positive liberty is preferable to negative liberty. While it is possible to argue on the one hand that negative freedom is the freedom to starve, and on the other hand that freedoms endorsed by specific institutions with clear vested interests and agendas are technically no freedoms at all, the answer perhaps lies in the middle of the two extremes. For the initial purpose of this paper, however, it must be asked: To what extent is it possible to exercise freedom in its negative sense in contemporary society? Contemporary society is here delineated as the advanced, consumer, competitive, capitalist, industrial, democratic, dominion-driven dispensation, an acronym for which is ACID, one that has been adopted (and slightly adapted) from the ecophilosopher, Karl Hoyer (2012, 44–72) (who attributes it to Sigmund Kvaloy Setreng). Shortly after a person is born, he or she is given an identity number, national security number, or whatever the barcode-like number is called in the country in which a person is born. This number “plugs” one into a socio-political and economic system where invariably fiat currency intermediates almost all activity, and fiat currency is debt-based—inherent to it is the need to pay back the debt created the moment money is issued. This is one reason why in ACID a person will never be allowed to exercise negative liberty: there is always a tax-person, a banker, a bureaucrat, an inspector, an auditor, or any of ACID’s henchmen knocking at the door, so to speak, to keep the cogs of a debt-based economy turning. One is never left alone to do as one likes, free from interference by other people, people who generally represent the interests of the system.

These systemic interests (of which economic control is only one) are regurgitated in various forms via the corporate-owned mass media, as Chomsky and Herman (2002, 306) remind one: the mass media “are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function by reliance on market forces, internalised assumptions, and self-censorship, and without overt coercion.” Various other ACID perpetuation mechanisms have been the subjects of scrutiny: Mill (2003) saw them in the dangers of democracy; various thinkers saw them in the contradiction that is the closed capitalist core of an allegedly open democracy (Alperovitz via Speth 2008; Barnes via Speth 2008; McChesney via Chomsky 1999; Nadar via Steger 2009; Speth 2008). Marcuse (1972) saw them in the expansion of a homogenising one-dimensionality of what he called “Advanced Industrial Society” (or AIS, which is fully coterminous with ACID), Deleuze (1992) in disciplinary societies and societies of control, and Princen (2010) in what he calls “traffic control measures.” These ACID perpetuation mechanisms are aspects of a system that forces upon a person a narrow positive freedom but marginalises chances of exercising negative freedom.

When discussing the topic of the debt-based economic system referred to above, interlocutors have often responded in defence of the system by claiming that it works, that despite imperfections it is the best system human beings have managed to construct after centuries of “progress” through previous forms of economic activity. They point out that the technology used, for example, to type this paper, is all a product of the system and that one should be grateful for it all. However, the imperatives accompanying ACID—expand, consume, “progress,” increase, dominate, compete, accelerate, develop, and so on—have led the human species, as well as the ecosystems constituting most of life on planet Earth, to an unprecedented crisis. Foster, Clark and York (2010, 155) explain:

It is impossible to exaggerate the environmental problem facing humanity in the twenty-first century. Available evidence now strongly suggests that, under a regime of “business as usual” with no substantial lessening of the drivers of environmental destruction, we could be facing within a decade or so a major “tipping point,” leading to irrevocable and catastrophic climate change. Other ecological crises—such as species extinction, the rapid depletion of the oceans’ bounty, desertification, deforestation, air pollution, water shortages and pollution, soil degradation, the imminent peaking of world oil production (creating new geopolitical tensions), and a chronic world food crisis—all point to the fact that the planet as we know it and its ecosystems are stretched to the breaking point. The moment of truth for the earth and human civilization has arrived.

“Business as usual” is the domain of ACID, and Foster et al. (2010) have identified it as being instrumental in causing ecological destruction. Considering that business as usual in ACID is quantitatively represented by indices such as GDP, one can again see the link between the business as usual of ACID and ecological destruction in these observations from Kovel (2002, 48):

Capital employs purely quantitative indices such as gross domestic product (GDP) because they are convenient indices of accumulation. Scarcely a critic of the ecological crisis has refrained from commenting upon the stupid brutality of this number, which reduces the living and the dead alike to the common denominator of what can be extracted from their

commodification. It is necessary, though, to see thinking in terms of GDP as no mere error, but the actual logic of the reigning power.

Clearly, then, some interlocutors have very narrow definitions in mind when they claim that the contemporary globalised economic system is “the best” system human beings have been able to create. The technology they lionise is designed to break after a specific period of time (as is the case with all products of technology made for mass consumption) so that the corporation that produced it can continue accruing massive profits (and can also play its part in keeping the cogs of the economy turning). This is known as planned obsolescence, something that engineers and scientists are employed to orchestrate despite the obscene ecological impact of a world full of technology-designed-to-break for the sake of (debt-based) economic activity. Planned obsolescence is typical of the ecological impacts of several large-scale industries now found all over the world and which are inseparable from the broadly-accepted notions of development and democracy. This links back to system-endorsed positive freedoms: they are exclusively prescribed by a dominant institution. In the broader context of ACID, freedom is the positive freedom *to develop*, as Konik (2015, 15–16) points out via Sachs:

... Truman promoted ever increasing production and technological advancement as key to the well-being of all nations, regardless of their economic, political, social and cultural differences, nuances, and dreams. Sachs holds that this was the first time that a “world view” was prescribed in which “all the peoples of the earth were to move along the same track and aspire to only one goal—development.”

The development of ACID and economic growth go hand in hand. Economic growth is measured in numbers that increase as the money supply does, numbers such as the GDP index, but in a debt-based fiat currency (the currency of ACID), as the money supply is increased, so is global debt. Inherent to this phenomenon is an obligation to pay money back (which requires more money creation, entailing more debt), hence constant expansion of the lucrative industrial activity that has been equated with progress in ACID. This kind of industrial “progress” comes in many forms, for examples, the fossil-fuel industry, the agricultural industry, and the meat and fish industries, all of which have had devastating consequences for the ecology of the planet. A 2017 Oxfam report clearly states the consequence of this link between this economic model and its ecological consequences: “Our economic model is based on exploiting our environment and ignoring the limits of what our planet can bear.” Indeed, ecological exploitation must occur for the “progress” and development of this type of economy, a claim substantiated by the simple fact that ecological exploitation continues to accelerate alongside the now global imperative to “progress,” grow and develop as per the economic model of ACID. Environmental and political author and activist, Monbiot (2017), offers support for this contention with the following: “Growth must go on—it’s the political imperative everywhere, and it’s destroying the Earth. But there’s no way of greening it ...” Founder and president of the Living Economies Forum, Korsten (2016), adds: “Contrary to the promises of politicians and economists, this growth is not eliminating poverty and creating a better life for all. It is instead creating increasingly grotesque and unsustainable imbalances in our relationship to Earth and to each other.”

Considering the opening reference to Mill's (2003) observation about the need for "experiments of living," where he commented that "modes of life should be proved practically, when anyone thinks fit to try them," the ecological crisis is perhaps a wake-up call that ACID is a failed experiment which has jeopardised the well-being of the natural systems on which all life depends for survival.

A Promethean Spanner in the Dialectical Works?

Mill's *On Liberty* was published the year 1859. It is an eerie coincidence that in the same year the first commercial oil well went into production in Titusville, Pennsylvania, USA. The world's population of human beings at that time was one billion. Commercial oil provided the means by which human beings would multiply their population seven-fold in an evolutionary-historical blink of an eye, but it did not provide the motive. The motive can be traced to specific attitudes, to the kinds of thoughts that human beings entertain about the relationship between themselves and the rest of the world, because what "people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to the things around them" (White Jr. 1967, 11). White identified Christianity, technology, and science as instrumental underpinnings of the attitudes that would after the industrial revolution bring about an anthropological onslaught against nature; capitalism must be added to the list because it is the basis of the growth- and debt-based economic system in question.

Christianity, having institutionally dominated the direction of human thought for well over a millennium and having persecuted, oppressed and often obliterated¹ that which was alternative to it, spread the imperative of dominion-over-the-earth, widely eliminating alternative approaches to living and thereby starting the first of the homogenisation projects in the history of Western-dominated civilisation. Reductionist science continued the project of spreading the dominion imperative, even though eventually it would abandon the notion of God. Descartes, for example, anticipating the flavour of scientific inquiry as it would develop out of the period of Christian domination, writes in his 1637 *Discourse on Method* (1972, 119) that he looks forward to the time when the new science will render humans "masters and possessors of nature"—unsurprisingly, Descartes was a devout Christian. Bacon, a figurehead in the scientific arena, stated that the "secrets of nature are better revealed under the torture of experiments than when they follow their natural course" (Hadot 2008, 93). In light of these and other similar sentiments, Hadot (2008, 123) states the following: "What we must say, I think, is that with ... Bacon, Descartes, Galileo, and Newton, a definitive break ... may have taken place, and these scholars discovered the means of progressing in a decisive and definitive way in this project of dominating nature, limiting themselves to the rigorous analysis of what is measurable and quantifiable in sensible phenomena."

Alongside Christianity and science one can place technology and capitalism (which have already, to some extent, been commented on) as central in the project of delineating the scope of ecologically deleterious positive freedoms available to a citizen of ACID. Christianity,

¹ For an example of the Christian prosecution of the Cathars, Albigensians and Bogomils, see: www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cathars-albigensians-and-bogomils (accessed 7 July 2018).

reductionist science, exclusively-pragmatic technology and capitalism are “shapers of discourse” that have spread ecologically problematic attitudes across the globe, attitudes that have “steered” human actions that result in ecologically disastrous outcomes. This is not to say that these shapers of discourse are solely responsible for motivating ecologically problematic human actions, but they are the historically dominant drivers of attitudes that have influenced human action over the course of Western history.

Regarding technology and capitalism in ACID, the creation and use of technology are intimately connected with the focus on “what is measurable and quantifiable in sensible phenomena” (Hadot 2008, 123) as per the use of instrumental reason identified by Horkheimer (1947). Instrumental reason can be thought of as the application of reason for purely and exclusively technical-pragmatic purposes. Horkheimer (1947, 104) does offer a glimpse of the relevance of the pragmatic and instrumental attitude in the context of the ecological crisis: “Modern insensitivity to nature is indeed only a variation of the pragmatic attitude that is typical of Western civilisation as a whole.” Heidegger’s analysis of technology (1977) as something essentially entangled with the process of “Enframing” reveals a coterminous attitude towards nature, where nature is reduced to nothing but a “standing reserve” of resources for human use.

The constituents of the ecological crisis, the direct physical causes of the crisis, the attitudinal causes of the crisis, and the perpetuation mechanisms that prevent much needed changes in the direction of ecological sustainability, all constitute an unprecedented problem facing human beings, as well as the countless forms of life that are destroyed in the wake of ACID’s *modus operandi*. The focal areas of this paper so far depict a dispensation in which the possibility of conducting experiments of living is marginal, even negligible, because dominant shapers of discourse paved the way for a global platform characterised by socio-political and economic homogeneity that dictates the extent and limits of freedom. Furthermore, this almost all-encompassing system, ACID, which is partly a result of certain problematic attitudes toward nature and simultaneously a perpetuator of those attitudes, is a disaster for the ecology of the planet. Keeping in mind the notion that ACID is perpetuated by various mechanisms, and accordingly that alternatives to ACID (or experiments of living) are thereby marginalised or negated, consider very broadly the philosophical notion of the dialectical process.

A dialectical process, in broadly Hegelian terms, is a process consisting of three parts: a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis. A thesis is an idea; in the spirit of simplicity, I will use the example of “self” as a thesis. In this limited example, the antithesis of “self” is “other.” A synthesis of the two might be “community.” The dialectical process, therefore, is a model often used to describe how change occurs: change of a concept, society, or system. The process requires that the thesis and the antithesis merge, combine, or overlap at some point, or else a synthesis cannot be arrived at—in other words, something new cannot emerge. In Hegelian logic the synthesis will, in its turn, become a thesis, and by being negated provoke a new antithesis, synthesis, and so on.

It is certainly the case that “new things” have emerged and continue to emerge in and from the dispensation of ACID. The “new things” to which one is perhaps able to refer are generally compatible within the confines of consumer capitalism, pragmatic technology, and reductionist science—some of the very shapers of discourse that have been identified as instrumental in spreading ecologically problematic attitudes. However, have any of the dominant system characteristics really changed since the dominion-enforcing reign of Christianity, since the ubiquitous expansion of pragmatic technologies, since the compartmentalising materialism of reductionist science, and since capitalism’s need for growth? One might perhaps be able to refer to isolated examples where a considerable change occurred, examples like the end of race-based slavery, or when the right to vote for leaders was granted to all people. However, the context of the ecological crisis is a reminder that systemically nothing has really changed. The general characteristics of the system remain the same ones that have been ecologically problematic since they became dominant. And, as already pointed out, mechanisms exist that prevent change of the characteristics that have been identified as ecologically problematic.

The relevance of the reference to the dialectical process should now be clear: in ACID, the dialectical process is “frozen” in any large-scale sense via an intricate interconnection of dominant physical and non-physical system components characterised by competition, dominion, utility, and a variety of other characteristics that can be called Promethean (under inspiration from Hadot). These characteristics create a Promethean homeostasis. In *The Veil of Isis*, after having traced the different directions the concept of nature has taken through parts of recorded history, Pierre Hadot summarises two different approaches to conceptualising nature (2008, 91–98), one of which is helpful in comprehending the character of ACID and its ecological consequences. The Promethean attitude is “inspired by audacity, boundless curiosity, the will to power, and the search for utility” and it “penetrates the secrets of nature... through violence.” Hadot states that the Promethean attitude has “engendered our modern civilisation and the worldwide expansion of science and industry,” and he warns that the “blind development of technology and industrialisation ... spurred on by the appetite for profit, places our relation to nature, and nature itself, in danger.”

In Hegelian terms—if these must be adopted—one might say that the system has become so homogenised by the Promethean attitude and by the systems of ACID that any antithesis to a thesis is an antithesis only in name, and that the synthesis (or every synthesis, in succession), has incrementally “ironed out” all genuine antitheses, so that only qualitative homogeneity remains. Or—using the well-known formula for encouraging originality, coined by De Bono (1970) as “lateral thinking”—in the present encompassing system the only lateral thinking that is tolerated is the kind that does not question the system itself, but merely promises its more efficient operation. In a 2012 BBC interview, Castells, author of *Rise of the Network Society* (2010), offers a glimpse of support for this contention about the homeostasis of ACID when he says that “the political institutions are impervious to change,” and of course the political institutions are central in and for ACID. Braidotti (2013, 58) also speaks about the “inertia of established mental habits” in a manner that suggests a stagnation of the dialectical cycle: “I do think that one of the most pointed paradoxes of our era is precisely the tension

between the urgency of finding new and alternative modes of political and ethical agency for our technologically mediated world and the inertia of established mental habits on the other.” Foster, Clark and York refer to a “prevailing hierarchical social order” with a “commitment to stasis in its fundamental social-property relations” (Foster et al. 2010, 17), a social order where “those on top have a vested interest in blocking fundamental change” (2010, 27).

Therefore, at a very superficial level it is possible to agree with the broad concept of “the end of history,” a concept attributed mainly to Fukuyama—but only in the sense that the concept highlights an ideological goal attributed to the Promethean and its contemporary manifestation as ACID, rather than as an accurate depiction of the normative (or desirable) “positive status” of ACID (let alone the capacity to put an arbitrary stop to the historical process itself), which Fukuyama (1992) is clearly in favour of:

Writing in the twentieth century, Hegel’s great interpreter, Alexandre Kojève, asserted intransigently that history had ended because what he called the “universal and homogeneous state”—what we can understand as liberal democracy—definitely solved the question of recognition by replacing the relationship of lordship and bondage with universal and equal recognition. What man had been seeking throughout the course of history—what had driven the prior “stages of history”—was recognition. In the modern world, he finally found it, and was “completely satisfied.” This claim was made seriously by Kojève, and it deserves to be taken seriously by us.

Leaving aside the question, whether this interpretation is compatible with Hegel’s own work (which it arguably is not, considering the difference between Hegel’s “logic” and actual history), Fukuyama does indeed take Kojève’s claim seriously, and espouses support for liberal democracy, which is the political component of ACID. However, the problematic characteristics and mechanisms of ACID so far outlined make it hard to agree with Fukuyama. Promethean characteristics, qualities, and attitudes result in actions that marginalise alternatives to the Promethean, and also result in the construction of dominant system “mechanisms” that prevent alternatives from arising. Put differently, the Promethean is like a ruthless dictator, whose “success” is attributable to his or her might and dominance (and who accordingly eliminates opposition), rather than like a meritocratic leader who facilitates any kind of promising system-wide change.

Orphic Alternatives

It has been argued that the dominant characteristics of ACID are ecologically problematic and that mechanisms exist that prevent socio-political and economic change, hence the claim that ACID is something in which the dialectical wheel is prevented from spinning in any substantive manner. However, this does not mean that “antitheses” are not available. The word “antitheses” is used very loosely here; a better option would be the phrase “alternatives.” These alternatives are ones characterised by qualities that would clearly be unfamiliar in the broad arenas of ACID. One example is the Occupy Movement of 2011–12, a movement in which attention was drawn to the reign of what was referred to as the one per cent—the one per cent of the world’s population that owns and controls considerable portions of the world’s wealth and uses it to reap massive profits, usually via socially problematic,

ethically problematic, and ecologically problematic means. It is clear that some of the characteristics of the movement are entirely different to those common to ACID, something which Chomsky comments on in a 2012 “Democracy Now” interview: the movement “spontaneously created something that doesn’t really exist in the country [USA]: communities of mutual support, cooperation, open spaces for discussion ... just people doing things and helping each other.” This is an important observation in the context of this study: people cooperating and helping each other, i.e. not competing. The movement offers such glimpses of manifestations of alternative attitudes—alternative attitudes that need to be paid attention to when addressing the question of what to do in light of the ecological crisis. Broadly, these alternative attitudes can be called Orphic. Hadot (2008, 91–98) says of the Orphic attitude that it “penetrates the secrets of nature not through violence but through melody, rhythm, and harmony”; and, “the Orphic attitude ... is inspired by respect in the face of mystery and disinterestedness.” Some more examples of Orphic attitudes will be offered below.

Orphic areas of focus, to differing degrees, espouse attitudes that are in contrast to the problematic ones grouped under the label Promethean, and the former are offered as a “response” in the context of the ecological crisis. A certain indulgence on the part of the reader is generally required here: indulgence in the form of a kind of “suspension of disbelief” regarding some of these “suggestions.” Without it, the reader would not, for example, give someone like Graham Hancock (whose important work has, despite some striking recent confirmations by scientists, been largely side-lined by mainstream scientists), a chance to convince her or him. Hancock (1995; 2015) identifies contemporary civilisation as one with amnesia, where what is forgotten is a large and crucial chunk of human history in which humankind reached a sophisticated level of civilisation. Despite its sophistication, the civilisation was unable to survive a cataclysm; but there were some survivors and they initiated megalithic stone building projects that convey to future civilisations important ‘messages’ from vast antiquity. The Orphic message is clear here: ACID is not the apex of human history, and furthermore, past advanced civilisations have met their demise, suggesting that ACID is not impervious to collapse—despite its status of being “advanced.” The question of how to best anticipate cataclysmic events arises, and in the case of ACID, the event appears to be a cascading series of ecological collapses induced by human actions. The answers are perhaps to be found in changes to the relationship between human beings and nature, in a direction away from anthropocentrism and towards biocentrism or ecocentrism.

In search of Orphic “alternatives,” one can reflect on what is known about older cultures, cultures like the Kogi, the Ik of Uganda, the Navajo, the Hopi, the Cree, Ojibwa and the San (listed by Hartmann 1998, 154). They all share the attitude of deeply respecting the interconnection of the human and non-human world, and accordingly see human beings as a reciprocal part of nature. These older cultures “are most often co-operators, not dominators,” and “the anthropological record shows that not one culture believed itself to be separate from and superior to nature” (Hartmann 1998, 154). One can begin to identify local participants in the “unnamed movement” written about by Hawken in *Blessed Unrest* (2007), a movement consisting of between one and two million organisations and groups all working toward

justice in various spheres, and though disparate, these organisations and groups share the vision of an ecologically, socially, politically, and economically sustainable dispensation. One can give attention to a non-reductionist scientific model such as Sheldrake's theory of morphic resonance (1991), which proposes that characteristics of a species are shaped by non-physical fields connecting all members of the species rather than purely physical and quantitative genetic processes. One can take seriously an approach to human economic activity Eisenstein calls sacred economics (2011), an approach that is unrecognisable in character, and in social and ecological impact, when compared to that of ACID. One can access the tomes of information made available by the Zeitgeist Movement (2014), which is characterised by a strong sense of technological and scientific pragmatism, yet manages to align itself with sustainable approaches to providing for physical needs in a context of finite resources. One can adopt the perspectives nurtured in deep ecology, which has the ecological goal of "the protection of the planet and its richness and diversity of life for its own sake" (Naess 2008, 100).

Permaculture: An Accessible Orphic Arena

Clearly lacking in the literature about ecologically sensitive (Orphic) alternatives, is a clear route for transition from an ecologically problematic dispensation characterised predominantly by Promethean attitudes, to an ecologically sustainable dispensation characterised by Orphic attitudes. This is perhaps a common limitation regarding outlines of systems and ideas alternative to the dominant ones of ACID, and if nothing in the form of actionable steps toward solutions were to be offered, then it would be a limitation of this paper as well.

This is where permaculture becomes an invaluable Orphic addition in the context of the ecological crisis. Permaculture is a design system constituted by 12 design principles, informed by various ecological observations, and motivated by the imperative for human beings to co-exist in a sustainable manner with the non-human world. Considering what has been said about transition, permaculture plays a crucial role because it offers very specific principles that can be applied by individuals and groups of individuals. There is, however, no one-size-fits-all way to implement permaculture. In permaculture, every environment is a manifestation of different natural features, and often synthetic features too, that need to be observed, and in which human beings need to interact and make small and slow changes, accepting feedback, valuing the marginal, and so on—these latter clauses are allusions to specific permaculture principles. They are all context specific. Permaculture is a context-specific, adaptable, patient, accessible, realistic, down-to-earth, actionable approach to creating Orphic change. It is an embodiment of the awareness of the need to carefully design and construct alternatives to the systems of ACID from the ground up via ecologically respectful means.

So when faced with the question of how to transition from ACID to something sustainable and ecologically respectful, the answer is not to be found in something as complicated, idealistic, and perhaps ultimately impotent as voting for a "green" political party (because in

practice there is only one party, “the business party,” as Chomsky once wryly observed in a Newstatesman.com interview, 2010). Rather, answers are to be found in the assembly and use of a compost toilet; in the planting of fruiting trees; in the catching and storing of rain-water; in growing some herbs and edible leaf-crops near the home kitchen; in getting rid of “the television” (a “portal” to the ideology of the corporate owned mass media); in purchasing one or two solar panels and one or two deep-cycle batteries and learning how to adapt one’s lighting and (for example) computer-powering needs to this small solar-power set-up; in being creative with the “waste products” that usually end up in the bin and making useful items from them; and so on. These may seem like small steps, but one need not be part of some bigger social phenomenon, or be rich, or be talented, or well-connected socially, in order to take the steps—and this simplicity is part of what makes permaculture very appealing in the context of the socio-political and economic complications that underpin the ecological crisis.

Remembering the opening remarks to this paper about positive and negative freedom, permaculture is one of the few arenas in which one can learn how to exercise negative freedom—in the implementation of small, slow, sustainable, synergistic systemic solutions that together add up, with the consequence that the need to depend fully on the homogenised and homogenising systems of ACID is thereby reduced. It is not being suggested that permaculture can feed the world. Perhaps it could, but the world’s seven and a half billion people grew to that number because of the widespread commercialisation of fossil-fuels since the second half of the nineteenth century (when the population of human beings was only one billion). The fossil-fuel system is now widely acknowledged to be inherently unsustainable—something that uses a finite resource can never exist infinitely, as pointed out by Diamond (2005, 490): “While there has been much discussion about how many big oil and gas fields remain to be discovered, and while coal reserves are believed to be large, the prevalent view is that known and likely reserves of readily accessible oil and natural gas will last for a few more decades.” If something is inherently unsustainable then it must come to an end, so attention must be drawn to the awkward question: Then what? However, it need not be the case that the global fossil fuel systems collapse (or the ecologies of the planet collapse in a manner that cripples “business as usual”—whichever occurs first) before permaculture becomes incorporated into broader socio-political and economic endeavours. On smaller scales, if one wishes to conduct small “experiments of living,” then permaculture is a great place to start, as it offers numerous options to put ecologically sensitive ideas and attitudes into practice and thereby exercise some level of autonomy in the face of the seemingly overwhelming juggernaut that is ACID.

Philosophy: Orphic Resonance

Clearly, a “working dichotomy” has been foregrounded: a dichotomy between ecologically problematic attitudes and ecologically respectful ones; a dichotomy between the Promethean and the Orphic. The Promethean, due to its characterisation in part by dominance, its focus on having dominion over the non-human world, and a variety of other characteristics, has marginalised the Orphic, whose various characteristics have made it easy to be dominated

(this is perhaps a criticism of the Orphic). It is with the dichotomy between the Promethean and the Orphic in mind, as well as with the broad context of the ecological crisis, that one can turn to philosophical contributions that shed important light in context of the ecological crisis. The first is a text called *Philosophy in the Present* (2009), in which Badiou and Žižek offer their answers to the question of the role of philosophy in the present.

Both philosophers make it perfectly clear that philosophy occurs when faced with incommensurability, or in other words, when insurmountable barriers to dialogue are encountered: Žižek explicitly says that philosophy is not a dialogue (2009, 50). There is relevance here to the difficulty of dialogue, or the inherent dichotomy, between Promethean agents and Orphic activists. Here are several other characteristics of philosophy Badiou and Žižek (2009) identify: philosophy is the creation of new problems; philosophy occurs when faced with incommensurability, mutual exclusivity, and paradoxical relations; philosophy occurs when one lacks the certainty of “being at home”; philosophy occurs when faced with internal foreignness, and the breakdown of organic society; philosophy is the Elucidation of choice; philosophy sheds light on the distance between power and truths; philosophy does not occur in the confines of preconceived ideas of human nature, the confines of humanity as it has been historically constituted, or the confines of the established model of humanity; philosophy occurs alongside the “transformation of life.”

Each of the above philosophical focal areas opens up possibilities for insight on various aspects of the ecological crisis. For example, “humanity as it has been historically constituted and defined” is a phrase that Badiou (2009, 74–75) uses in the following: “Each time that philosophy confines itself to humanity as it has been historically constituted and defined, it diminishes itself, and in the end suppresses itself. It suppresses itself because its only use becomes that of conserving, spreading and consolidating the established model of humanity.” It has already been suggested that various shapers of discourse have dominated historically: the attitudes of domination and dominion partly characterise them, propelling their dominance and dominion, and via their dominance and dominion, they homogenised the historical playing field, resulting in ACID, the Promethean writ large. In other words, the Promethean “model of humanity” is “humanity as it has been historically constituted” (Badiou and Žižek 2009, 74–75). The authors make it clear that when philosophy confines itself to, conserves, spreads, or consolidates humanity as it has been historically constituted, it diminishes and suppresses itself. An obvious route, then, towards practising philosophy in a manner where it is not diminished or suppressed, is to broaden focus and bring (incommensurable, dichotomised) alternatives “into the mix,” so to speak. In other words, the historically dominant Promethean may be positioned against the marginalised Orphic. Accordingly, the dialectical wheel can turn properly: the dominant theses of the Promethean will be posed against the antitheses (or alternative ideas) of the Orphic, and synthesis can potentially occur. This approach to philosophy can play an important role in any process with the goal of comprehending the problems constituting the ecological crisis, and in seeking potential solutions to it.

The second text of interest to the issue of the role of philosophy in the context of the ecological crisis is Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995). The purview here is mostly different from that in *Philosophy in the Present* (Badiou and Žižek 2009) with the occasional overlapping implication. Hadot traces the notion of philosophy as a way of life as it was practiced in ancient times—an approach that is of considerable value in the context of the ecological crisis. For example, Hadot (1995, 254) quotes Bergson to convey the character of habitual perception: “Life requires that we put on blinkers; we must not look to the right, to the left, or behind, but straight ahead, in the direction in which we are supposed to walk. In order to live, we must be selective in our knowledge and our memories, and retain only that which may contribute to our action upon things.” This is one manner of perception where human beings retain knowledge which may contribute to our action upon things, and Hadot (1995, 254) refers to this form of perception as “utilitarian perception.” It is not suggested that utilitarian perception is “bad,” because certainly everyday pragmatism is necessary in the pursuit of food, shelter, and a variety other material needs. However, the Bergson quote does suggest an exclusive pragmatism, and this is the realm of the Promethean, where the “objects” of nature are valued only for their instrumental value and not their inherent value.

The concept of philosophy as a way of life, on the other hand, nurtures a form of perception where the inherent value of extant things is foregrounded, where human attitudes align with an ecologically respectful cosmic consciousness, and where human actions accordingly are aligned with qualities of the Orphic. For example, Hadot (1995, 206–212) says of the practice of philosophy as a way of life that “the feeling of belonging to a whole is an essential element: belonging, that is, both to the whole constituted by the human community, and to that constituted by the cosmic whole.” The following from Hadot (1995, 273) perfectly sums up the Orphic character of philosophy as a way of life, while foregrounding the theme of interconnection and downplaying exclusively utilitarian tendencies:

Philosophy in antiquity was an exercise practiced at each instant. It invites us to concentrate on each instant of life, to become aware of the infinite value of each present moment, once we have replaced it within the perspective of the cosmos. The exercise of wisdom entails a cosmic dimension. Whereas the average person has lost touch with the world, and does not see the world qua world, but rather treats the world as a means of satisfying his desires, the sage never ceases to have the whole constantly present to mind. He thinks and acts within a cosmic perspective. He has the feeling of belonging to a whole which goes beyond the limits of his individuality.

Conclusion

By exploring features of ACID, which is the Promethean writ large, as well as by highlighting alternative Orphic attitudes, and by touching on philosophy in two “formats,” additional components of a conceptual framework have been offered in an attempt to broaden the context of the ecological crisis. It is a framework that can be used to approach and address the worrying issue of the ecological crisis: a crisis which hitherto has clearly not been adequately addressed considering the extent to which it is daily exacerbated. This lack of a substantial response is explained in part by the overwhelming prevalence of utilitarian and habitual forms of perception in a world where, historically, the Promethean attitude has

spread and, ultimately, reigns supreme in the contemporary dispensation that is ACID. Orphic attitudes and endeavours can act as counterbalances to the pernicious consequences of exclusively instrumental thinking and action. Numerous examples of Orphic endeavours can be scrutinised in order to inspire and inform further ventures that might nurture substantial responses to ecological problems. Permaculture as a design system stands out as particularly helpful in growing the broad arena of the Orphic—the 12 permaculture principles can be applied in almost any context to promote ecologically-aware thought and action. Badiou and Žižek’s (2009) outline of philosophy in the present highlights the importance of not confining philosophy within the borders of “historically constituted humanity,” which is to say within the Promethean realm of ACID, and Orphic endeavours can assist in this regard. Hadot’s research into philosophy as a way of life depicts philosophy in an ostensibly Orphic light, where human thought and action are oriented within a cosmic perspective and all of nature is endowed with intrinsic value, as opposed to instrumental value. Orphic features such as the ones touched upon in this paper, however briefly, are examples of ingredients in a recipe that must be experimented with if the ecological crisis is to be adequately addressed. Application of “more of the same” Promethean thought and action, premised on the exclusive instrumentality and pragmatism of business as usual in ACID, cannot be expected to solve ecological issues that arose from such Promethean thought and action in the first place.

Acknowledgements

- This work is based on research supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant Number 99188, SARChI Chair in Identities and Social Cohesion in Africa, Nelson Mandela University). Opinions, findings, conclusions and recommendations expressed in this work are those of the authors alone and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.
- The author also acknowledges research support he received during his PhD (2014–2017) from the National Research Foundation, and the University of the Free State, South Africa.

References

- BBC. 2012. “Alternative Economic Cultures: Manuel Castells.” <http://news.bbc.co.uk> (accessed 7 July 2018).
- Badiou, A., and S. Žižek. 2009. *Philosophy in the Present*. UK: Polity Press.
- Braidotti, R. 2013. *The Posthuman*. UK: Polity Press.
- Castells, M. 2010. *The Rise of the Network Society*, second edition. UK: Blackwell.
- Chomsky, N. 1999. *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*. UK: Seven Stories Press.
- Chomsky, N., and E. Herman. 2002. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. USA: Pantheon Books.
- De Bono, E. 1970. *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step*. USA: Harper and Row.

- Deleuze, G. 1992. "Postscript on Societies of Control." *October*, 59: 3–7.
- Democracy Now. 2012. "Chomsky: Occupy Wall Street 'has created something that didn't really exist' in U.S.—solidarity". www.democracynow.org (accessed 7 July 2018).
- Descartes, R. 1972. "Discourse on Method." In *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, volume 1, translated by E. S. Haldane, and G. R. T. Ross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Diamond, J. 2005. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. USA: Penguin.
- Eisenstein, C. 2011. *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift and Society in the Age of Transition*. USA: North Atlantic Books.
- Encyclopaedia Iranica. "Cathars, Albigensians, and Bogomils." www.iranicaonline.org (accessed 7 July 2018).
- Foster, J., B. Clark, and R. York. 2010. *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth*. USA: Monthly Review Press.
- Fukuyama, F. 1992. "Introduction to *The End of History and the Last Man*." <https://www.marxists.org> (accessed 7 July 2018).
- Hadot, P. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. USA: Blackwell.
- Hadot, P. 2006. *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, translated by M. Chase. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hancock, G. 1995. *Fingerprints of the Gods*. UK: William Heinemann.
- Hancock, G. 2015. *Magicians of the Gods: The Forgotten Wisdom of Earth's Lost Civilisation*. UK: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Hartmann, T. 1998. *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*. UK: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Hawken, P. 2007. *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World*. UK: Penguin.
- Heidegger, M. 1977. *The Question concerning Technology and other Essays*, translated by W. Lovitt,. New York and London: Garland Publishing.
- Horkheimer, M. 1947. *The Eclipse of Reason*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hoyer, K. 2012. "Ecophilosophy and the Contemporary Environmental Debate." In *Ecophilosophy in a World of Crisis: Critical Realism and the Nordic Contributions*, edited by K. Bhaskar, K. G. Hoyer, and P. Naess. UK: Routledge.
- Konik, I. 2015. "Whither South Africa: Neoliberalism or an Embodied Communitarian Indigenous Ethic?" PhD thesis, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa.
- Korsten, D. 2016. "Why the Economy Should Stop Growing: And Just Grow Up." <http://davidkorten.org> (accessed July 2018).
- Kovel, J. 2002. *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the END of the World?* London and New York: Zed Books.

- Marcuse, H. 1972. *One Dimensional Man: Studies in Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. London: Abacus.
- Mill, J. S. 2003. *On Liberty*, edited by Bromwich and Kateb. USA: Vail-Ballou Press.
- Monbiot, George. 2017. "Too Right it's Black Friday: Our Relentless Consumption is Trashing the Planet." www.theguardian.com (accessed 7 July 2018)
- Naess, Arne. 2008. *The Ecology of Wisdom*, edited by Drengson and Devall. USA: Counterpoint.
- Newstatesman. 2010. "The NS Interview: Noam Chomsky." www.newstatesman.com (accessed 7 July 2018).
- Oxfam. 2017. "An Economy of the 99%." www.oxfam.org (accessed 7 July 2018).
- Princen, T. 2010. *Treading Softly: Paths to Ecological Order*. USA: MIT Press.
- Sheldrake, R. 1991. *The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God*. Vermont: Park Street Press.
- Speth, J. 2008. *The Bridge at the End of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*. USA: Yale University Press.
- Steger, M. 2009. *Globalisms: The Great Ideological Struggle of the Twenty-First Century*. USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- White Jr., L. 1967. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science*, 155(3767). <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>.
- Zeitgeist Movement, The. 2014. "The Zeitgeist Movement Defined: Realizing a New Train of Thought." <https://www3.thezeitgeistmovement.com> (accessed 7 July 2018).
- Zwolinski, M. 2018. "Libertarianism." www.iep.utm.edu (accessed 7 July 2018).