

Misanthropic Environmentalism

Contributed by Jack Manno
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The tendency to reproduce distress across generations is the unfortunate but necessary outcome of the ways we are “wired” for action. As a result of our evolution as animals we have at least three powerful and distinct internal prompts or urges that motivate our behaviour: instinct, conditioning and human intelligence. The first two we share with all animals.

Instinctual drives and conditioned responses are experienced as feelings that prompt us quickly into action. When being chased by a predator it's best not to waste much time thinking about a response. The origins of instinct (genetic) and conditioning (developmental) each enter our awareness as feelings: longing, loathing, attraction, fear, hunger, desire. Instincts are passed on to us biologically and are pro-survival at the level of the species. They bestow on us the motivation to find food and drink, enjoy a mate, and nurture and protect offspring. Often instinctual urges are experienced as feelings so powerful that they often make it extremely difficult to think rationally about sex, food, shopping and child-bearing and child-raising even when it is in our interest to make intelligent choices in these arenas.

Conditioning is the process that installs on us a reliable set of physiological or psychological responses associated with a particular stimulus. The classic example is the conditioning of a dog to respond by salivating in anticipation of food when a bell rings, if the dog's regular feeding is preceded by the ringing of a bell. The pro-survival evolutionary mechanism operating here is the establishment of a hard-wired recording of a stimulus and response together. It conditions us to react quickly without thinking. The stimulus is usually associated with feelings of pleasure (conditioning an attraction) or pain (conditioning an avoidance). We encounter a stimulus (the bell) and our bodies produce a hormonal and electrical set of responses we experience as the feelings that originally became associated with the stimulus, like the dog's feeling of anticipation and excitement that starts him drooling. When the feelings are pleasurable, we may try to reproduce the stimulus regularly and this can readily lead to various compulsions and addictions. When the feelings are bad (terror, sadness, anxiety) we react negatively and are set up for chronic avoidance, isolation, self-torment which also can lead us to compulsively avoid certain experiences or to soothe our feelings addictively.

The susceptibility to conditioning of humans and other animals is pro-survival. It is important in our development that we learn and remember signs of danger or opportunities for food in such a way that again we act quickly and without thinking. The terrible cost for human well-being is that oppressive systems learn how to deliberately exploit the installation of feelings in order to produce behaviour that appears to benefit the oppressor in the short term but is unsustainable (ant-survival) in the longer term. We have multi-billion dollar industries designed to re-stimulate certain feelings in order to trigger certain behaviours such as getting people to spend their money in unthinking ways.

Oppressive social systems are able to reproduce themselves by systematically mistreating people in ways that often sets us up for self-destructive behaviour. And for a communal species that must rely on each other and the world around us, all destructive behaviour is necessarily self-destructive. An entire economy can be set up so that people act systematically against their own self-interest in ways that serve a given power-structure. Oppression operates in this way to keep the oppressed from successfully resisting their oppression. When people are systematically hurt by having their thinking ignored and their person disrespected we become conditioned to feel bad and powerless in response to many of the conditions of our lives, including the destruction of the natural world of which we are a part.

This conditioning, like all conditioning, is designed to foster unthinking behaviour. Thankfully we are able to change this situation. Even when we are conditioned by powerful feelings to act in unthinking ways, our intelligence is fundamentally unimpaired. We are always capable of deciding to act on our thinking rather than our feelings, especially when we understand the role of these installed feelings in disempowering us.

In a powerfully destructive system such as the present industrial growth society, everyone is subject to the manipulation of instinctual and conditioned feelings in ways that tend to reproduce the oppressive relationships in a society. This is how oppressive societies self-organize in ways that are contrary to the long-term survival and flourishing of the society. People are systematically damaged in ways that reproduce the oppressive society and the damage done to people's

intelligence ultimately undermines the long-term sustainability of that society. Both the oppressor and the oppressed are hurt in this relationship, exactly to the extent they participate or collude in the oppression.

As a result of the misinformation recorded in us during our early experiences of emotional hurt we are often engaged in a monologue of self-criticism, feeling bad about ourselves, constant criticism of others and feeling bad about them, fear of danger, fear of closeness, chronic loneliness, anxiety, feeling better than or less than others etc. Each person has her or his own internal noise, the playing of mental recordings of distress that on some level one understands to be largely nonsense but yet nevertheless draws our attention away from the world around us, constraining our intelligence to exactly the degree that our mind is elsewhere, unable to be fully present. The constant internal noise of distress recordings plays and is accompanied and amplified by an ongoing assault on our awareness orchestrated by ingenious commercial promoters trying to get our attention. Most of the attempts, either commercial or political, to draw our attention, are carefully designed at great expense to stimulate and reinforce the internal distress recordings. Most commercial operations in the overdeveloped part of the world in the age of hyper-capitalism depend on us to buy things we don't need. Simply to meet basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, closeness, and creativity would require only a fraction of the economic activity of modern consumer societies. Therefore to keep the industrial growth society growing they must rely on us to act stupidly in relation to our best interests by driving too much, falling into the allure of addictions, buying things we don't need and in general wastefully using up the gifts of Creation.

Given the cacophony of internal distress recordings and external huckstering, it's an amazing tribute to human intelligence that we actually have enough attention to care for our families, to form bonds of friendship and community, and to produce art of great beauty and intelligence. Starting from our intelligence and connection with each other and the earth it is clearly possible that we can yet learn how to live well within the web of life without tearing it asunder. But this will, I maintain, require a real commitment to liberating ourselves from the affects of our early hurts in order to heal our capacity for intelligence, our Good Mind.

What are the implications for the environmental movement of this emphasis on the liberation of intelligence and the fostering rational caretaking of the planet? First, environmentalists should understand that human attention and creativity are the most important natural resources we have in our efforts to protect and preserve life-sustaining environmental conditions on the planet. We should emphasize education explicitly designed for liberating the human mind, the outlines of which have been explored by Paolo Freire and many others. We need to significantly improve our understanding of human intelligence, especially how our intelligence can be injured as a result of emotional and physical damage and what methods work best for recovery. It also means that we need to examine some of the widespread misconceptions in the way many environmentalists think of the problem: one, the economist's conceit that the relationship between people and the earth's natural resources is necessarily one of scarcity, and two that by nature, humans are inherently a scourge on the planet, our spread across the globe likened to a cancer. Let's look at both of these.

"Scarcity is the problem": Environmentalists often warn us that the Earth's resources (water, fuel, soil, food) are scarce. They try to frighten people into action with images of shortages and resulting violent competition over dwindling resources. Environmentalists are right to point out the damaging impacts of waste and over-consumption, but trying to frighten people into believing that the planet is running out of resources is the wrong approach. Actually there are more than enough natural resources to meet everyone's rational needs. There is no rational reason on earth for anyone to go without adequate food, clean water, comfortable shelter, beautiful clothing. Most of the earth's resources are wasted in the service of distress; weapons, addictions, substitutes for real connection and community.

People are condemned to conditions of scarcity because of injustice and theft of their resources. This is not news to anyone. The most important resource in the world is human intelligence and that often appears to be scarce because it's suppressed by the oppressive society. The most important environmental task before us is freeing human intelligence. With enough intelligence we can mimic natural ecosystems in all our human systems, making all waste become resources; reusing, recycling, conserving. If we used only the amount of oil and gas needed to meet rational human needs there would be plenty of time to transition from fossil fuels to clean renewable energy.

While scarcity may not be the problem, feelings re-stimulated by fear of scarcity definitely are part of the problem. Much of the distress that drives over-consumption is based in early hurts around not having enough: food, or clothing, or attention, or love. If there is scarcity, you can feel justified in hoarding. Fears of scarcity by people who are running oppressor patterns leads to the plunder of other people's resources who then experience real scarcity. These oppressor patterns and fears are installed early. Young people are taught to compete with each other based on notions that there will never be enough recognition, or prizes or good grades for everyone. Power comes with being able to mete out rewards. School children are taught about the competitive "struggle" for survival that drives evolution while ignoring the millions of examples of co-operation and co-evolution constantly transpiring around us. Everyone in capitalist societies

has been deeply hurt and confused by this. Systematically re-stimulating people's fears of scarcity is not going to improve our chances of having good environmental policies.

Humans are the problem. Environmentalists often paint a bleak picture of the impact of human beings on the earth. We often fantasize, "If only there were far fewer people on earth (of course its always people we don't know we want rid from the planet, certainly not us or our loved ones) or if human beings as a species were simply eliminated then life on earth could thrive without us." This is nonsense. Many more species than currently exist on earth went extinct long before human intelligence made its first appearance. Millions of ecosystems dried up, froze, or drowned. In fact, each human being of all varieties is precious. All living things are better off if people are actually thinking about them.

The world is a better place for each human that is born. We don't know how many people could live well on earth in harmony with the great diversity of other life forms if we were freed from distress. My guess is that it would be considerably more than current population but it wouldn't be limitless. We are more than capable of limiting the total number of human births particularly if we make certain that every infant is welcomed into the world with a large team of adults and older children ready to care for her and love him. Misanthropy, the chronic disdain for human beings, is often not far below the surface in much environmentalism.

We are incredibly lucky to be alive at this point in human history. We are now called upon to act in a leadership role on behalf of all life on Earth. What a great challenge. We get to notice how deeply we care about the special places and plants and animals we know and love, even some we don't know. We get to fight for them as if they were family (which they are). We need the rapid spread of tools that help us to heal our intelligence in order to stay connected with each other and to the powerful pro-survival forces that derive from the universal will to live.

There is considerable evidence that we have these tools readily available to us and many more are being recovered. There are a variety of spiritual disciplines that help us to find peace in prayer or silence, a respite from the constant bombardment of distress in our own minds and beamed at us in attempts to capture our attention. There is the "work that reconnects" designed by Joanna Macy, exercises that encourage people to assist each other in expanding their perspectives, acknowledging fully the damage being done by the industrial growth society, facing and welcoming the deep pain and discouragement this acknowledgement brings and most importantly deciding to act individually and with each other in slowing the destruction, tending the wounded and building alternatives. There is the work and insights of Re-evaluation Counselling (RC) that has discovered the healing power of emotional discharge - tears, tremblings, laughter and so on - in a practice of mutual aid through co-counseling. specifically intended to aid in the healing from the effects of early emotional and physical hurts.

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