



2005

Ecology, Morality and Synergism

Thomas Power

Dublin Institute of Technology, thomas.power@dit.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <http://arrow.dit.ie/beschrecart>



Part of the [Other Public Health Commons](#), and the [Real Estate Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Power, T., "Ecology, Morality and Synergism", *Property Valuer*, Vol 24, No. 3, Spring 2007

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Surveying and Construction Management at ARROW@DIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@DIT. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@dit.ie, arrow.admin@dit.ie, brian.widdis@dit.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License](#)



ECOLOGY, MORALITY AND SYNERGISM

Thomas Power

*Lecturer Economics and Financial Management
College of Engineering and the Built Environment
Dublin Institute of Technology
thomas.power@dit.ie*

Key words: Ecology, morality, synergism, Gaia Hypothesis,

PREFACE

This short essay looks at the views of unorthodox members of three professions. Richard Douthwaite an anti-growth economist, James Lovelock a "mythical" scientist, and Yoneji Masuda, a Japanese guru of the Information Technology age. All three, (although Lovelock appears to favour the earth more than mankind), assume a re-orientation of human thinking. Douthwaite's "moral society", Lovelock's "ecological society" and Masuda's "synergistic society" have little basis in reality, despite their intrinsic appeal. Despite the "high knowledge consumption" of an information age, predicted by Masuda, history teaches us that knowledge has always been used by man to gain power and not to better the lot of mankind. There is no reason to suppose that, in the information age, man will behave any differently than he has down through the ages. The new wealth (knowledge) will, most likely, be appropriated by the rich and powerful. Altruism has rarely been an outstanding attribute of the powerful classes. It is more probable that the diffusion of computers notwithstanding, control of the information systems of the future will remain in the hands of some central authority. This would lead to less, rather than more, autonomy for the individual.

"Guiding the Invisible Hand" - Man as Master of his Own Destiny:

Douthwaite looks forward to a no-growth age which will be based on his three "copybook" principles viz.

- (a) The future must be given equal weight to the present.

As future generations have no say in present decisions, we will be tempted to sacrifice their future claims to our present consumption. The only way to give the future a

voice is to value future benefits as highly as present benefits i.e. we should use a zero discount rate. (But see Beckerman on the logical implications of such a rate). This would mean, for instance, that fossil fuels should be used only to develop renewable energy sources or to increase the stock of bulk metals extracted from their ores. (Renewable energy should be used in the manufacture of metal *products*).

(b) Other people's interests should be given equal value to our own.

Projects should involve more than a mere transfer of resources from one group in society to another. If a project produces an overall gain but involves a transfer of resources, the beneficiaries must ensure that the losers in the transaction are left no worse off, now or in the future as a result. Here again we meet the principal of "the polluter pays".

(c) Some things are not for sale under any circumstances.

Douthwaite (1992) would put an "infinite" value on certain things i.e. non-renewable energy sources. These things would not be tradeable for money or increased production. This, of course again implies no discounting. There is no room for compromise on this principle because "compromise *always* leads to environmental damage or loss". However, he does suggest that trade-offs might be possible, for instance, if one fragment of the environmental mosaic is removed, then an equivalent piece should be restored elsewhere.

The job of society, therefore, will be to decide on what goals it desires, a moral rather than an economic process, and to insist on the application of the above three principles. While acknowledging the unlikelihood of such decisions being taken by society, Douthwaite gains some comfort from the possibility of a world-wide economic collapse. Such an eventuality would give society a breathing space (from the pressing demands of growth) in which to consider its future. I fear Douthwaite will have to await his economic collapse before we see any fundamental changes in the way economic man interacts with his fellow beings and his environment.

The "Gaia Hypothesis" - Nature as Mistress of her own destiny

James Lovelock (1993) developed the hypothesis that the earth is a living organism, regulating its own atmosphere and ecological system. He named the hypothesis after

"Gaia" the Greek earth goddess. This "superorganism" is a living evolving entity - a giant ecosystem kept in equilibrium by chemical cycles and feedbacks involving living organisms. Thus rain forests make clouds to cool the atmosphere and marine algae help to regulate the carbon cycle and emits sulphur gases to seed the clouds. According to this hypothesis, in the event of global warming, the oceans' algae would increase its emissions of sulphur gas to cool the earth's atmosphere again i.e. there would be automatic stabilisation of the ecosystem.

Compared to what Earth has withstood, through time from outer space (meteors and other violent impacts), Lovelock considers man's abuse of the environment to be a relatively minor matter. However, unless we behave responsibly towards the environment and begin to act in concert with nature as other species do, then the "superorganism", Gaia, may, as a natural act or survival, cause changes in the ecosystem, which would make life for man extremely difficult if not impossible. Lovelock sees man not as tending a fragile environment but, rather as a *dispensable* part of a giant self-regulating system. If any part of that system threatens the stability of the whole, it may be discarded for the good of the entity.

Synergism - Man in Unison with Nature.

Masuda (1988) sees industrial society being transformed into an information society. The vehicle for this transformation will be computerization. In this society the "production of information values and not material values" will be the driving force behind all human activity. The high mass-consumptions society, which characterises the most advanced stage of the capitalist system will be replaced by a "high mass knowledge" society in which computerization will make it possible for individuals and groups to create knowledge and to use such knowledge for self fulfilment. Such self fulfilment will be achieved within a voluntary system, the goal of which will be the welfare of society as a whole. The principle underlying such an altruistic system will be "synergism", which will replace the free competition of the present capitalist system.

The means to achieve this "consensus welfare" for society will be direct participatory democracy via computer networks. Individual and group preferences will be input and through repeated loops and feedback a policy decision will be made, based on achievement of an impartial balance between the losses and gains to all participants. "Synergism" means individuals and groups co-operating in complementary efforts to

achieve common well-defined (due to increased knowledge production in the information society) goals of society.

One of the results of this "synergism" will be the conversion of society to an ecological system. This conversion will come from an awareness of the commonality of man's destiny i.e. that "there is no place where man can live, except on this earth, which first gave him life". The ultimate goal of the information society will be that man should act in harmony with nature in the creation of a "synergistic" world.

SUMMARY:

The foregoing represents somewhat fanciful versions of what society of the future should be. They all have one strand in common i.e. man must act in an enlightened way to achieve morally desirable goals, the security of future generations through the self sacrifice of the present generation. A respect for the environment is central to such an enlightened approach. Douthwaite relies in extremes on the collapse of the economic system to usher in this new age of enlightenment. Masuda sees it being achieved via a transformation from an industrial society to an information society. Lovelock would see its realisation through man's acknowledgement that he is but one organism of the many that go to make up the ecosystem, that is Gaia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Richard Douthwaite (1992), "The Myth of Sustainable Growth" and "Guiding the Invisible Hand" in "The Growth Illusion", The Lilliput Press, 4 Rosemount Terrace, Arbour Hill, Dublin 7.

Michael Viney (1993) "Power of a Scientist's "Poetic Idea" in "Networks of Power" (A supplement to The Irish Times, Dec. 29th 1993).

Yoneji Masuda (1988), "Computopia" in "The Information Technology Revolution ", Tom Forester (Ed.), Basil Blackwell Ltd., 108 Cowley Road, Oxford, OX4 1JF, U.K.