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## *Resourceful Earth*

*One by one, pillars of classical logic have fallen by the wayside as science progressed in the 20th Century, from Einstein's realization that measurements of space and time were not absolute but observer-dependent, to quantum mechanics, which not only put fundamental limits to what we can empirically know but also showed that elementary particles and the atoms they form are doing a million seemingly impossible things at once.<sup>1</sup>*

The pillars of classical logic may appear to have fallen into ruins like the Pergamon Frieze. But their mythic and religious strength continues to support a vertical, hierarchical view of our relationship with Earth, seemingly based on our own observations and presuppositions about ourselves. Our measurements of space and time have, it is true, expanded the limits of our knowledge. But this has not, as yet, shattered the human mental categories supporting a vertical vision of our being “in charge” of Earth: whether through divine appointment or by exercising our unique talents.

These latter have now brought us a realization that elementary particles and the atoms they form are not only the very “stuff” of Earth's body but also the “stuff” of our bodies also. And that just some of the seemingly impossible things they do at once are keeping us firmly balanced on Earth's surface while enabling us to take in the oxygen we need to breathe and the food (supplied

1. Krauss, *A Universe without Purpose*.

by Earth) that our bodies need to survive. Generally speaking, we take these relationships between Earth and ourselves for granted.

Also taken for granted by most of us nowadays are our evolutionary origins within the planetary community of life. Modern science and technologies enable us to see Earth as a whole; as one cosmic body that, over eons of time, has given life to a diversity of creatures that include ourselves. If asked, we would generally agree that these facts underpin the radical oneness and evolution of earthly life, including our own, from its beginnings to the present day. Our widespread use of the term “globalization” signals an increased appreciation that Earth’s planetary systems have worked and continue to work as a whole in sustaining the lives of its multiplicity of beings.

Now, however, “globalization” also signals our failure to react positively to the implications of these scientific observations by reducing our demands on Earth’s shared resource base. This is the dark side of human “globalizing”: one that requires the reassessment of our own institutions and lifestyles, of their increasing pressure on shared resources and on Earth’s ability to sustain life. Underpinning this dark side is a self-image of humans as “owners” and of these resources as our “property.” This has led to a type of development worldwide in which what is really the common property of all species (the earthly commons) is being appropriated and gradually destroyed by us through the process of accumulating monetary wealth.

Peter Brown exposes the historic European origins of this process:

Since the time of Hesiod and the great grain silos of the Bronze Age, the storage and sale of foodstuffs was an unchanging feature of the landscape of the Mediterranean. What changed significantly in the fourth century AD was the manner in which the tax system of the Roman Empire created a situation in which the rich were able to change food into gold to their great advantage. To sum up a complex development: from Constantine onward, the Roman state flooded the economy with gold. The gold *solidus* became the symbol of a new order.<sup>2</sup>

The later progress of this new order, known today as capitalism, will be followed up in some detail in later chapters. An important point made here by Brown is that by the end of the fourth century, a “poverty line” had come to be drawn in the social imagination of contemporary society: between the area of society where the mighty *solidus* circulated and a bleak social hinterland where the *solidus* was either absent or difficult to obtain. Translated into today’s monetary terms, this is now the largely accepted and legally endorsed

2. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 14f.

capitalist “life process” of civil and “civilized” societies worldwide. As such, it ignores the internal reality of our social relationships as well as our interactions with the “earthly” commons that, in scientific terms, constitute the planetary resource base below and above land and sea that sustains all earthly life.

The global abuse of those resources now demonstrates that capitalism takes no account of our total dependence on their durability and stability. At the same time, we are beginning to learn their parameters, which scientist Johan Rockström has defined in terms of planetary “boundaries.” Within these (and nowhere else) we (and implicitly, all other creatures) can safely live and operate. They include climate change; ocean acidification; stratospheric ozone; biogeochemical nitrogen; phosphorus inflow to oceans; global freshwater use and the rate at which biological diversity is lost.<sup>3</sup> All of these contribute to and are essential for earthly life, including our own. Together, they are the common property of all life on Earth.

These boundaries that make life sustainable are set by the very nature of the Earth itself. However, they have been and are being broken through by us, most clearly by human population growth. This, together with our increasing consumption and consequent depletion of resources, has reached a level where not only our own future, but that of all life on Earth depends on a commitment from us to decrease our overuse of them. Rockström’s scientific overview keeps many different projects in play; but the important point here is the fact that evolution by natural selection is a property of the whole planet, not just of its organisms alone: and certainly not of our species alone. This raises fundamental questions about the planetary nature and impact of our lives and lifestyles, questioning the motivations behind them and justifications for them.

These are questions that the natural sciences traditionally ignore. So scientific acceptance of this planetary overview is not enough to change attitudes, important and informative as it may be. On its own, it may even obscure the need for radical change in all of us and fail to challenge the pre-suppositions behind the “business as usual” and “at all costs” conduct of major world economies. To a very limited extent, the visible effects of passing one planetary boundary, that of climate change, have begun to influence global political and economic policies. But prevailing cultural norms, implicitly supported by pervasive mental and religious categories, ensure that we remain almost impervious to its practical and personal demands on us.

One important reason for this is that, like the Romanized Christian Empire, we regard all Earth’s resources as potential sources of increased monetary wealth. This conviction is all the more powerful for now being implicit. As is

3. Rockström et al., “Planetary Boundaries.”

its underlying assumption that, as a species, we are in a superior and therefore different category to all others. A corollary to that is the assumption that all other species and our shared resource base are there primarily to serve us and our “special” interests. This claim to superiority through species’ distinctiveness is now generally based on perceptions of our intellectual capacities and our ability to use them to our own individual and collective advantage.

Reactions to the NGO *Earth Charter* showed that such a claim, although usually unquestioned, is bolstered culturally and religiously by the assumption that the faculty of reason and/or the possession of an immortal soul have been given to our species alone. So while our belonging to Earth in the same way as all other earthly creatures is an obvious fact at one level, our fundamental earthly oneness with them has been sidelined by analyzing it into a vertical value system.

According to this system, no less effective for being tacit, while some species are rated higher than others, we deem ourselves highest of all. Those “below” us are graded according to their usefulness to us. Lowest of all are those that inhabit the soil. Underpinning this hierarchical categorization are two presuppositions that work to the advantage of those distinguished by financial, religious, or political power. The first is that each subordinate level is not to be valued for its own sake but only in terms of its usefulness to those above it on the hierarchical scale. The second is that relationships of domination and subordination are written into human nature.

In regard to us, these presuppositions function on the basis of race, gender, wealth, and creed. In regard to other species, it means we rate them practically and economically; that is, in terms of what monetary return we may make from or with them, generally through global industrialized processes. It is taken for granted that Earth itself and its resources exist for the sake of those of us who, through economic, political, or military force, may appropriate and claim them as property: that is, with an entitlement to use them for financial wealth.

In Christian cultures, God is at the apex of this hierarchical pyramid, indeed is deemed its Creator. Earth and all other-than-human species form its base and are, therefore, assumed to be furthest from God. By definition, angels are bodiless and so closest to God. But as “earth-embodied souls,” we deem ourselves next closest to “Him”; on the grounds that our souls make us “like to God.” While the average churchgoer today would not use the term “paradigmatic” for this self-assessment, its religious and philosophical underpinnings have shaped and informed public and private ways of integrating different aspects of our lives into a coherent whole. Its verticality both validates and maintains a privileged place for us—or rather, for some of us—within specific

social and economic systems “sanctified” as the proper political or economic order.<sup>4</sup>

Politically and economically this has functioned as a territorial claim: that Earth and its resources exist for a nation’s use and for the financial benefit of individuals. Or, in contemporary Western economic doctrines, for the particular use and benefit of some “high-net-worth individuals” with liquid assets over a certain sum. This hierarchical presupposition is exemplified in industries built on slave labor where—in fields, mines, and factories—human beings continue to be treated like “dirt”; that is, as another resource base. Such assumptions are so deeply ingrained in the class systems of Western culture that they are taken for granted: without the need to appeal to their philosophical or religious underpinnings. This means that any recognition of our true oneness and interconnectedness, and consequent positive responses to it, have to be learned, understood, accepted, and assimilated within the different levels of our individual and collective existence.

To that end, I shall designate Earthiness as Oneness, defining it as a material, shared global state of being alive; with all life being supported by planetary resources held in common. This distinguishes it from Platonic discourse about “the One” which implies a complete lack of such physical multiplicity in that it infers a level of unity beyond that of any earthly body. In effect, this has been the intellectual basis for and the goal of a thought system that acknowledges a principle of unity beyond the earthy or physical. That is the literal meaning of the term *metaphysical*. Plato focused attention on this realm: one believed to be accessed only by the intellect or soul and inaccessible to our bodily senses. But we now know that the boundaries of our planetary realm really are “metaphysical,” in the sense that they go beyond what is immediately accessible to our senses. But they remain within the physical compass of Earth’s boundaries, thereby underpinning our inescapable Oneness within them and with all its creatures.

The Platonic view of unity, however, continues to support Christian hierarchies and their cultural templates where the intellectual or spiritual pursuit of “the One,” whether as “the Good,” or “God,” is an end in itself. Pursued through rigorous intellectual and critical thinking, it is seen as needing no validity beyond the particular community that it supports and with no earthly goal or implementation in mind. Indeed, being “earthbound” is seen as an impediment to reaching “the One.” A philosophical description of the mode and end of its pursuit can be found in the account of the death of Socrates, where all earthly bodily relationships (such as that with his wife and children) are considered mere distractions from continuing discussion of ideas:

4. Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis*, 88–106.

The speeches of the *Phaedo*, and more precisely the philosophical discourses that untie the soul from the body, take place in the cell where Socrates is sitting with his male friends during the final hours before his death. Xanthippe, his wife, has been hastily thrown out. This is not a place for women. Socrates does not want any women in the cell when he comes close to accomplishing the “living for death” announced by philosophy. Thus while waiting for the perfect, definitive untying, he attains the experience of death through a final dialogue about his own death.<sup>5</sup>

In Christian circles influenced by Platonism, Denys the Areopagite coined the term *hierarchia* or “sacred order” to describe the concept of working out a cosmic pattern of government whose aim is “the greatest possible assimilation and union with God.”<sup>6</sup> While this does not exclude a perception of our bodily Oneness within the community of life on earth, it focuses attention on the incorporeal union between (implied) low, middle, and high orders of being that correspond to graded stages of divine knowledge and spiritual activity leading beyond this material world. The basic Platonic structure of thought is intended to move us “upward” toward the One (God) by going beyond earthly embodiedness. Reality is perceived as being arranged in graded vertical levels that mediate and relate to one another as subordinate hierarchies linked through a cosmic sympathy that embraces the whole; albeit in an outward *downward* movement of progressively diminishing radiation from God.

This underlying conceptual verticality and the human order based on it still finds its fullest material expression in Roman Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiastical hierarchies, ministries, liturgies, and architecture. In these, primacy is given to the sanctuary and to those men entitled to minister from within it. Implicitly, this physical “barrier” between sacred and profane exemplifies the continuing reluctance within church hierarchies to ordain women.<sup>7</sup> Like Xanthippe, they are assumed to be tied to corporeal bonds that bind the soul to earth, keeping it from its true home “above.” The wider cultural impact of such paradigms or vertical mental patterns that give us (or rather some of us) a privileged position not only on Earth but within the Universe, was demonstrated in the reaction to Galileo’s discovery of Earth’s true place in our solar system: a discovery that, by implication, challenged our hitherto unquestioned superior role and place within it.

This conjunction of cultural and religious hierarchicalism supported the assumption (for that is what it was) that God had created a universe in

5. Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 28–29.

6. Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis*, 89.

7. *Ibid.*, 90.

which the Sun and other planets revolved around Earth: and so around us. Three centuries later, science apparently triumphed when Galileo had been vindicated and our true place within the solar system, that is, within the planetary community of life, was established. In Darwin's words, we could now see ourselves as lineal descendants of previous forms of life:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on (around the Sun) according to a fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>8</sup>

However, the “grandeur” of this view of the oneness of earthly life was initially resisted by some as scientific heresy, as well as by those culturally and religiously disposed to discern and dismiss its implications for any claim to special status for our species. Regrettably, as I found with the responses to the *Earth Charter*, those implications are still rejected by some of us precisely on those grounds. Generally speaking, they are given token acceptance—and then ignored. So our arrogated right to ownership and to sole use of Earth's planetary resources is implicitly upheld. We continue to behave as if we alone (or more accurately, some of us) have a divine or civil right to them as our property; and so continue to claim the use of them for our own benefit and pleasure, whatever the destructive cost to other living creatures.

In effect, this has meant that, unlike the Galatians, no war has been declared against them. But conflicting interhuman claims to Earth's resources have led to the habitats of other-than-human species being destroyed and/or their lives endangered; some to the point of extinction. No bombs are dropped directly on the Amazon rainforest. Indirectly, the global mindset that sees its particular resources as exploitable for monetary gain is indirectly destroying the lives of all inhabitants, human and other-than-human, who depend on them.

The fact that we *know* how these destructive processes work distances us from fourth-century Rome. Officially, with some notable exceptions, Christians now also appear to have distanced themselves from any need to either justify or condemn this on religious grounds: that is, as being compatible or incompatible with Jesus's teaching. The glaring disparity between them was a real issue in fourth-century Roman Christianity and was coped with in some instructive ways:

8. Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 459–60.

Splendor was the key term in the definition of wealth. Splendor assumed income. But the practice of splendor gave little thought to financial matters in themselves. Rather, it had everything to do with how one looked, how one dressed, how one ate, how one travelled, and, last but not least, how often one bathed. Wealth sheathed the bodies of the rich with a set of unmistakable signals of prosperity and good fortune.<sup>9</sup>

So for educated, wealthy Christians such as Paulinus of Nola a retreat from splendor was seen as essential. He achieved it—in his own eyes—by taking apart and inverting at every point the social semiotics of the fourth-century rich. In describing himself and his fellow ascetics, he left a memorable image of “poverty” as “anti-wealth”; not as “unwealth.” He and a group of men with whom he identified no longer lived in great villas but in cramped cells and in close contact with the drab masses of the poor. They ate plain food and drank a minimum of wine from earthenware and wooden vessels. Above all, they were enveloped in the dull smell of the underbathed. This, says Brown, was the sure mark of poverty in the ancient world. (And still is.)

Paulinus’s notion of poverty as anti-wealth was so cogent to his contemporaries because, says Brown, it was grounded in intimate identification with the person of Christ. What Christ was this? He was, says Brown, very much the Christ of a particular generation. One might even say that he was a Christ whose image was calculated to resonate with Christians of a particular class faced by the dilemma of a person who was at times weak and helpless. Yet, for Christians after Nicaea, a Christ who was also the “fullness of divinity.” For Ambrose and then for Paulinus, he was very much a “late Roman Christ”; one whose humility was all the more stunning because it was based on a conscious act of self-effacement on the part of the majestic God whom he continued to be. The Christ of Paulinus was poor because he was a God who had hidden his *splendor* (but retained it) through a splendid act of self-effacement or humility:

“Humility” and “humble” are words to which Paulinus returns incessantly when speaking of Christ. And by “humble” Paulinus means a posture to the world that was defined in more sharply social terms than can be conveyed by the sentimental modern associations of the word: to be “humble” in the later Roman Empire was to be, quite bluntly, “unimportant.”<sup>10</sup>

9. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 220.

10. *Ibid.*, 222.



In such a way, Brown concludes, a converted aristocrat and his circle, who had carefully dismantled themselves of the strident denotations by which persons of wealth, power, and status had stood out in the late Roman world, faced society “as the bearers of a Christ equally shorn—but only for the time being—of his majesty.”<sup>11</sup>

“Only for the time being.” Herein lies the key to the notion of wealth in fourth-century Rome: as a spiritual exchange by which wealth on earth became treasure in heaven. For Paulinus, “worldly” wealth that stood for all that was most brittle in this world, most unspiritual, most stubbornly rebellious to the will of God, could be transmuted through acts of pious giving to the poor into all that was most glittering and glorious in heaven. This “spiritual exchange” meant that base, earthly wealth joined the distant purity of the heavens. Feeding the poor was not simply an act of charity on earth: it mirrored heaven on earth. Ultimately the story of the Rich Young man did not obsess Paulinus as much as did the story of Dives and Lazarus. If only, Paulinus insists, Dives had stopped to look at Lazarus and pressed some alms into his hand, he would not have been buried in hell.<sup>12</sup>

All of this was welcomed by landowners. No product of the wild or of cultivated land was shown in its own right. All of nature was presented only as if it were to be “offered up” to the dominus, the owner of the estate—preferably by ranks of neatly dressed and deferential peasants. The numinous bounty of the land was undeniable. But it had, as it were, been tilted toward human owners. It existed only to be given to the lords of the land.<sup>13</sup>

The above account is a mere outline of Brown’s masterly study of wealth, poverty and the gap between the rich and the poor in the Roman Empire of the fourth century CE. But it reveals salient attitudes to ownership of the Earth and its resources that strike a very contemporary note. It shows how the desacralization of the land has involved a transfer of the notion of fruitfulness from the land and its resources to what human beings make of it and get from it. And by doing so, implicitly and explicitly grants them full license to make the most monetary profit possible from that fruitfulness. This egocentric, utilitarian attitude that values Earth in human terms has had lasting effects not only on our shared planetary resources but on us.

In the following chapters this historic trajectory will be traced in some detail. Here I shall finish by simply stating that when and where the value of

11. *Ibid.*, 223.

12. *Ibid.*, 224–38.

13. *Ibid.*, 239.

nature is assessed primarily in monetary terms, we forfeit any entitlement to the fundamental sense of well-being that is one of Earth's greatest gifts to us and to all living beings. This relies on a sense of the intrinsic value of the other-than-human world, based religiously on the non-hierarchical implications of the biblical tenets that state:

God saw all that was made; and it was very good;  
God sent the groundling away . . . to serve the Earth from which  
it was taken.<sup>14</sup>

SAMPLE

14. Gen 1:31; 3:23 translated by Korsak, *At the Start*, 4, 11.