

Preface

Blessed be you, mighty matter, irresistible march of evolution, reality ever new-born; you who, by constantly shattering our mental categories, force us to go ever further and further in our pursuit of the truth.¹

Twenty years ago I came back from the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio with a very important document: *The Earth Charter*. It was produced, after much debate, by the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) gathered there. When, after my return, I was asked to speak about the Conference to a group in Britain, I began with the Preamble to the Charter. Its opening sentence runs:

We are Earth: the people, plants and animals, rains and oceans,
breath of the forest and flow of the sea.²

As I read and commented on this, squirming, shuffling and subdued muttering gradually increased and eventually emerged into protests such as:

“We’re not Earth! We are more than Earth! Other than Earth! Different from Earth!”

Some went further, stressing what appears to make us different from all other Earth creatures:

“Our bodies came from Earth; but we have souls and minds and intellects that make us distinct from, superior to, in charge of all other earthly creatures.” This was a defining moment for me. It revealed both predominant attitudes to our “earthiness” and the strength of what Teilhard de Chardin calls “our mental categories.” It also revealed the need to “shatter” them. The difficulty of doing so, however, became all too clear as the meeting progressed and has become even clearer since then. A major reason for this was (and is) a long

1. De Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, 68.

2. See *The Earth Charter* (UNCED 1992) in Appendix 1.

established Western religious, intellectual and cultural education system that unquestioningly assumes the superiority of the human species, albeit on a variety of grounds. They include our sole possession of the faculty of reason; or of an immortal soul; or of a divine mandate to govern and use the Earth, its resources and other species for our own purposes.

Descartes's famous definition of existence (I think, therefore I am) completes a new myth about our relationship to the world; human beings are the things that think (the only things, and that is all they are) and the rest of the world is made up of things that can be measured (or "thought about"). Subject or object, mind or body, matter or spirit: this is the dual world we have inherited—where the brain's ability to distinguish and classify has ruled the roost. From this duality come the ideas we live by, what William Blake called "mind-forged manacles," the mental abstractions that seem too obvious to question, that construct and confine our vision of reality.³

Mary Midgley notes an important reason for the enduring appeal of this dualistic view of ourselves. It lies in an acceptance that conflict is a reality in human life and the desire to explain it. Whereas Darwin locates conflict *within human nature itself*, that is, between our various naturally incompatible motives, western Christianity has followed Paul's position in his Epistle to the Galatians:

The flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh and these are contrary to one another, so that you cannot do the things that you would (Gal 5:17–23).

This kind of entanglement between the moral life and mind-body dualism, which the Christian tradition drew from Plato, has repeatedly involved it in a dualist drama that has led to a great deal of unnecessary contempt and fear, both of the body itself and of the affections seen as belonging to it. It has also been used, Midgley says, to justify brutality to non-human animals on the grounds that they are not supposed to have souls. It persists in a special reverence for human intelligence, seen as almost supernatural, and even in an exaltation of virtual experiences over those that involve (earthly) flesh.⁴

This solitary self-image has scarcely changed over time, despite scientific endorsements and seeming cultural acceptance of evolutionary views of human life. A major obstacle is the fact that social mechanisms that link our contemporary experience to that of previous generations generally lack any

3. Suzuki and McConnell, *The Sacred Balance*, 192.

4. Midgley, *The Solitary Self*, 97–99.

organic and continuous relation to our earthly history. The effects of this cultural apartheid and divided worldview place each of us as a mind inside the limits of our bodies. This, we believe, is the edge of *me*, this layer of skin; this is the organism I propel through the world, surrounded by things, receiving sensory messages—smells, tastes, sights—through various orifices and nerve endings, which may help me to know the world outside; or may turn out to be dangerous misconceptions:

This idea of the body as a machine—quite new in the history of our species—has produced technology to remedy its limits; more machines to extend the reach, accelerate the motion, and magnify the strength and sensory acuity of this body machine as it acts on the world beyond. Mind within body—the ghost within the machine—that is what our culture teaches us we are, what we accept as obvious and normal and real.⁵

A major factor in this cultural disengagement from and disharmony with the land emerged in Rio: the growth of mega-cities in which billions of people are born, live, and die without any direct sensory experience of our relationship to and dependence on Earth's resources. In capitalist cultures, these visible obstacles to recognizing such dependence are religiously supported by the Christian belief that Earth exists solely "for man's use and benefit"; with that "benefit" now understood almost solely in terms of monetary gain. The destructive conduct endorsed by this presumption has increased in proportion to the growth of every country's GDP; with an accompanying shift in the perception of "wealth" from earthly abundance to "money." Or, in contemporary terms, from shared planetary resources to "shares" on the Stock Exchange; from our common future to commodity "futures."

Throughout the following chapters the economic origins and course of this shift in European cultures will be explored. The stress, however, will be on the decisive cultural and religious effects of the Emperor Constantine's conversion in 312 CE and the consequent "Romanization" of Christianity. Two main reasons for this approach that appear unrelated to each other can with hindsight be seen as interdependent. The first is the militarist character of that Empire, both before and after its Christianization, with its ever-increasing appropriation of land and ruthless subjugation of peoples through war and slavery. The territorial reach and effects of this on human populations have been extensively recorded. But their religious, economic, and environmental effects went far wider and deeper. Briefly here, the cult of the Roman gods and of the Emperor as divine, as *Dei Filius*, gave a religious legitimacy to war and

5. Suzuki and McConnell, *The Sacred Balance*, 192–93.

acquisition of territory that would be invoked time and again in later centuries and recorded in the advance of Christian colonization worldwide from the fifteenth century onwards.

The second factor is a desacralization of Earth, or Gaia, that legitimized appropriation and exploitation of the lands of conquered peoples. Both these factors are graphically presented in the pre-Christian Great Altar of Pergamon, a faithful ally of Rome in the eastern Mediterranean. It was erected by Eumenes II between 180–160 BCE to commemorate the conquest of the Galatians, depicting this as “the triumph of civilization over primeval chaos.” In her detailed description and interpretation of the Roman semiotics of the frieze, Brigitte Kahl concentrates attention on the human figures involved, notably that of “The Dying Trumpeter.” My interest centers, however, on the East Frieze with its archetypal mythic depiction of “Victory and Defeat.” There, next to Zeus, his daughter Athena wrestles with Alkyoneus, the youngest and favorite son of Gaia, the Earth Goddess.

This scene, says Kahl, is the most pathetic of those in the Great Frieze, and the only one featuring a female opponent of the gods and goddesses above her.

Reaching out from the ground which covers her body up to her breasts, Gaia raises her arms in a desperate plea for mercy. Her cornucopia, the horn-shaped vessel overflowing with a bounty of fruit, appears in her left hand. With her right hand she tries to hold on to her giant son Alkyoneus, who remained invulnerable as long as he could keep contact with the motherly ground. But Athena’s elegantly draped leg intervenes from above between the two of them. . . . As he is about to lose the life-preserving connection, the deadly poison of Athena’s snake penetrates his chest and his face is torn in pain and despair. Directly above, unmoved by the tragedy of Gaia and her son, the winged goddess, Nike, is approaching to adorn Athena with the crown of triumph.⁶

From the sixth century BCE onwards, says Kahl, this battle became a well-established iconographic theme and gradually came to define foreign peoples encountered in the process of colonization, whether as slaves or as prisoners resulting from war. It laid the foundation, she says, for some of the most fundamental polarizations that have shaped occidental identity constructs and western worldviews up to the present day.⁷ My main concern is with the underlying battle with and “conquest” of Gaia-Earth and her fertile offspring. As Peter Brown shows, her “desacralization” into a resource base conquered

6. Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined*, 92–93.

7. *Ibid.*, 94–96.

and ruled by divinely mandated human force played a crucial role in the later Romanization of Christianity.

Firstly, it brought about a crucial shift in attitudes to “wealth” in terms of both earthly and monetary resources. This entailed an understanding of the “transferability” of “wealth” from earth to heaven through humdrum acts of giving. Gifts to the poor and donations to the churches could build a real Christian “future”: both here and in the afterlife. Hence such chapter headings as:

Whatever somebody for the sake of his salvation and the repose of his soul will have donated . . . to the venerable church on behalf of the poor.⁸

In today’s secular culture, attempts to reconstruct or describe this mindset have a decidedly ironic ring. For it required an imaginative religious exercise in what has been characterized as “salvation economics”:

Go part shares with God for your possessions and render to the Supreme Father thanks for the gift that has been given to you by Him. . . . You and your household can keep all that you possess, provided that you take good care to declare that God is the donor of these things as well.⁹

Secondly, this quote from Paulinus of Nola implies that the landowner did not owe his wealth to the abundance miraculously fostered by the little gods of the countryside. Rather, the providence of the One God reached down in a great arc through every level of Roman society to touch the fields and those who owned them. This followed a wider shift in Christian attitudes toward society and the imperial system in particular. To think that wealth lay in the hands of a single, all-powerful God, to whom they were accountable for its use, was a novel idea. The power and range of this change in attitude to the relationship between Earth and wealth cannot be underestimated. It effectively desacralized the land by cutting it down to size as human property: to be grasped ever tighter in the hands of landowners to value and exchange it for “money.”

The trajectory of Christian colonization would spread this culture worldwide. While its religious justification has all but disappeared, its global effects are now all too evident. Originally, its sharply “vertical” view of the natural world (as existing for the landowner to accumulate money) was transposed to a higher plane where God was seen as the great *dominus*—the great landowner. And it was the *domini* themselves—the local landowners—who

8. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 475.

9. *Ibid.*, 237–38.

were “sharecroppers” of the Lord, holding their lands under God.¹⁰ By the seventeenth century, as we shall see, John Locke’s writings mark a tipping point between this religious model, its secular application in today’s market culture and its material, global effects.

A major collective and personal effect has been an increasing ignorance of both the truth and significance of our own earthiness. Yet that truth is now being proven negatively—by the perceptible impact of human lifestyle and market transactions on Earth’s climate and fruitfulness; and as a corollary, the now perceptible impact of climate change on ourselves. The latter is most notable in the lives of those most impoverished by these transactions. Together these call into question the common cultural understanding that Earth is our “property” to use and dispose of for monetary gain and in any way that increases it. Particularly over the past six centuries we have treated Earth and its inhabitants, human and more-than-human, as merchandise to be bought, sold, exploited, wasted, or discarded for money and status. The development, trajectory and effects of that attitude will be traced throughout the following chapters.

It now coincides, however, with a new and burgeoning scientific vision of the past, present and future of our universe; of the interactions between Earth’s lifeforms and their environments and of our own relationship to the “irresistible march of evolution.” Laurence Krauss, director of the Origins Project at Arizona State University, notes that we are like the early map-makers redrawing the picture of the globe even as new continents were being discovered. Astrophysics has allowed us to glimpse the truth that in its earliest moments our universe and all its “mighty matter” were contained in a volume smaller than the size of an atom.

We also know that, since the Big Bang around 13.7 billion years ago, there are more than 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe. And that, as far as we know, Earth is unique within the Milky Way Galaxy within which it belongs. This uniqueness, centered in its ability to support life, drives home the disastrous nature of dominant religious, mental, and cultural categories that underlie the refusal to accept the fact of our earthiness. And continue to do so in spite of knowing that our being “human” means that we are made from *humus* (soil); and that every breath we take depends on the “world-mothering air” embracing our planet.¹¹

The environments we have created for ourselves may have been and indeed are an extraordinary and unprecedented human achievement, constructed in large part by the awesome power of our abstracting, pattern-making

10. *Ibid.*, 239.

11. Hopkins, *Poems*, 56.

brains. But their essential transience should evoke a Darwinian sense of awe at the fact that humanity is blessed simply by belonging within the irresistible march of the evolution of life on Earth. And that we belong there and nowhere else.

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