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# Ancient Wisdom and Contemporary Ecological Problems

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## Abstract

The Australian Aborigines' environmental culture and the "double bind" approach used in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous are considered as a source for the generation of a new strategy for dealing with the ecological problems of our day. The strategy aims at achieving a negotiated outcome in issues of high societal risk related to waste management in the Hawkesbury region of Sydney, Australia.

## Introduction

The contemporary ecological problems are created by all of us and we are the beings who have to deal with them. This is an axiom. It is an illusion that science and technology, no matter how powerful, can save the world from ecological disasters.

The idea of scientific and technological "miracles" creates a distorted image of human power that "we are beings who possess nature and that our ability to transform and model it, using the power of our omnipotent brain, will help us to deal successfully with the ecological crisis". Such an attitude is totally wrong because it considers human beings at a particular position outside nature, imposing their decisions and actions upon it. By putting ourselves at a position of dominance over nature, we disenfranchise ourselves completely, because we are part of this nature. The way we relate to other parts of it is of crucial importance for our survival.

All traditional state religions have one God-man at the top of a universal hierarchy. The Darwinian model, together with the contemporary humanistic philosophy reinforce the idea that human beings are elevated above any other creatures. Nature is considered as a force that must be kept at bay by human will and strength. Such a point of view justifies easily the intensive exploitation of the earth's natural resources and of all other creatures in the name of satisfaction of the human requirements. The same point is visible in all approaches, applying to the design of our contemporary military, government, economic and even ecological (!) systems.

The following paradox manifests itself: **THE MORE WE CONSIDER OURSELVES IN A PARTICULAR PRE-SELECTED POSITION TO NATURE, AS THE MOST POWERFUL BEINGS CREATED TO RULE AND MANIPULATE IT ACCORDING TO OUR NEEDS, THE LESS POWERFUL WE ARE TO DEAL WITH OUR ECOLOGICAL PROBLEMS.** The resolution of this dramatic paradox - and our survival depends on how soon we accept this resolution - lies in admitting that the laws and principles from which the natural world arose are the same as those that generate human culture and society, and that we have equal opportunity to exist and evolve with all other creatures. The Aborigines of Australia have had this understanding for a hundred thousand years. It is no wonder that a similar understanding is typical for indigenous people who live nowadays in other countries - for example, Indians in America, Maoris in New Zealand, etc.

"It is the nature, which possesses us - we do not possess it" - this is the leitmotiv of Australian Aborigines' culture. We are created by the nature to live in harmony with it - "we have been here since the time before time began; we have come directly out of the Dreamtime of the Creative Ancestors; we have lived and kept the earth as it was on the First Day" say the Aboriginal Tribal Elders. The same forces which permanently pulsate in Nature, making the volcanoes to erupt, the tides to flood, the planets to revolve and the sun to shine, pulsate in us. "The Aborigines refer to these forces as their Creative Ancestors. Everything was created from the same source - the dreamings and doings of the great Ancestors; all creatures - from stars to humans to insects - share in the consciousness of the primary creative force, and each, in its own way, mirrors a form of that consciousness. In this sense the Dreamtime stories of Australian Aborigines perpetuate a unified world view" [\[3\]](#). Is it not this "unified world view" to which system science vehemently appeals when dealing with humanity's problems?

The idea of unity, penetrating deeply the naturally born Aboriginal "system science" compelled them to respect and adore the earth as if it were a book imprinted with the mystery of the original creation. The goal of life was to PRESERVE the earth, as much as possible, in its initial purity.

"The subjugation and domestication of plants and animals and all other manipulation and the almost barbarous exploitation of the natural world - the basis of Western civilisation and technological "progress" - were antithetical to INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY the sense of a common consciousness and origin shared by every creature and equally with the creators; to exploit this

integrated world was to do the same to oneself. The Dreamtime stories, common to all Aboriginal people across the vast continent of Australia, extend the idea of unity and harmonious co-existence not only to every living creature but also to the earth and the primary elements, forces and principles. Each component of creation acts out of dreams, desires, attractions, and repulsions, just as we humans do; therefore, the entrance into the larger world of space, time, and universal energies and fields is the same as the entrance into the inner world of consciousness and dreaming. The exploration of the vast universe and knowledge of the meaning of creation is experienced through an internal and external knowledge of self. Like any creation myth, the Dreamtime stories cannot be "scientifically" proved. The value of any creation myth is determined by its effect on people, the image they hold of themselves, and their place in the universe. For perhaps a hundred thousand years, the Dreamtime mythology sustained a culture (maybe the oldest known human culture) that lived in harmony with nature and was full of vigour, vitality and joyousness. The question of identity, of who I am, is resolved in the Aboriginal consciousness by knowing the full implication of where I am.. So important is the surrounding environment. There is a mystical interrelationship of these two most profound realms of existence - the physical body and the extended body of the surrounding environment. Each Aborigine knows his country as he knows himself, through his own body and the internalised images of his dreaming places - these are his identity. " . How can we be pure, if our surrounding environment is polluted? "I feel it with my body, with my blood. Feeling all these trees, all this country... when the wind blows you can feel it. Same for country... you feel it. You can look, but feeling...that put you out there in open space.", says a Kakadu Aborigine. Like the human body, the country is considered nonsegmentable; there are distinguishable features such as thighs, abdomen, and chest, but they form integral parts of a continuous living being.

The present ecological effort to re-establish a bond between human societies and the natural environment seems superficial compared to the Aborigines' deep identification with nature. For thousands and thousands of years this deep connection appears to have preserved both Aboriginal culture and the local environment in a harmonious balance. Without romanticising and idealising this culture, perhaps we can seek to understand their degree of identification with nature as a guide to transforming our present relationship with our environment. Otherwise it seems that we must continue to live with the thought that our ecological crises threaten our very survival.

The way to an effective community empowerment for dealing with ecological problems needs to be channelled through an altered understanding of our unity with the surrounding world. Without this understanding, it seems likely that our technological and scientific effort will be in vain. The first practical step might be to establish a common language concerning environmental issues between different sectors of society - farmers, technologists, academics, students, etc. The second and most decisive step would be to practice speaking the language of nature. Once upon a time we must have spoken this language better we do now, but it seems we have forgotten it. There must be aboriginal people who still keep its secret and who could help us to reclaim it.

We do not think this could happen until there is another kind of fundamental change in our attitude to nature - a change which would have to go much deeper than the superficial changes in values and lifestyle which have occurred in recent years. We would label this change as an innermost psychospiritual shift. Is such a shift possible? Let us consider a situation in which a profound shift of this kind has occurred in many thousands of human lives with consequences which are remarkable.

## **The "Alcoholics Anonymous" Paradigm**

There is good evidence that the program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has been more successful than any other kind of treatment in counteracting society's oldest and most widespread fatal addiction - to alcohol. The crucial steps of this program are (1) admitting powerlessness over alcohol, and (2) acknowledging some higher power which can relieve or remove the addiction. This is sometimes called the theology of AA, but it is also an illuminating illustration of the working of systems-logic in a situation that is analogous to the environmental issue described above. It was Gregory Bateson, in 1971, who first drew attention to the AA program as a cybernetical issue [\[1\]](#) and it seems surprising to us that his insights have not been more widely canvassed.

The way the alcoholic is operating when sober may be seen as a particular kind of epistemological "error" (which is widespread in our society) and his surrender to intoxication is the "logical" short-cut to correct the problem. There is a converse matching between sobriety and intoxication which is similar to the way we enjoy the many comforts in our living which our technology provides. This popular epistemology is self-reinforcing in an insidious way. Bateson revealed the epistemological "error" to be the belief that our relation to the largest system which concerns us - whatever it might be - is one in which INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY one's self has control. We understand from cybernetics that this notion that power lies in a part such as the self (which may have evolved from the Cartesian mind-body split) is systemically false. The power (mind etc.) is regarded as immanent, not in some part, but in the whole of the system.

For the alcoholic, admitting (1) powerlessness and (2) a higher power could be called a "double surrender", but in philosophical terms it is also a profound epistemological change - a change in how he sees himself in relation to the world. The situation arises through repeated experience of a double bind in which the particular false pride of the alcoholic is paradoxically reinforced by failure. This pride is not based on past achievement, but on an obsessive acceptance of a challenge - it is not "I did", but "I can". Success in staying sober attenuates the challenge leading to: "of course I can", but at the same time this pride narrows the concept of self in order to place the alcoholism outside the self ("I am not part of it"). Subsequent failure to abstain (which is a surrender to the system) is therefore necessary to "prove" that this unreliable epistemology is true. The double bind could be expressed as: "if you don't drink you go mad and crave for the drink that you then think you can manage successfully" and "if you do drink you go mad and crave for the drink that you then think you can manage successfully".

Early in AA history a member recalled having been told by Dr Carl Jung that even Jung could not and would not cure him - the only hope being a "spiritual experience" [2]. This is what most alcoholics who enjoy prolonged sobriety through the AA program maintain has happened to them. We equate this to the innermost psychospiritual shift which we suggested earlier could bring about a new relationship with our environment. It is summarised by saying: "I am part of something bigger". The cybernetical elegance of the AA program lies in equating the experience of defeat with the first step of real change. Repeated failure may lead to what is known as "hitting bottom" and an awareness that this process of surrendering to the closed system which is alcoholism may also apply to a relationship of surrender to an even larger (more powerful) system. This power which can only arise from the relationship - is immanent in the alcoholic's being in the world - seems to be decisive in breaking the Gordian knot of addiction.

An important feature of this new relationship which occurs is that it is highly personal - an intimate relationship which is unique for each individual. In AA it is called "God as I understand him". It seems that the freedom given to an addicted individual to conceive his own larger system, rather than have one imposed upon him, is crucial to the liberating and empowering process which

occurs. In AA this process occurs in the form of a constant stream of language which arises from the "experience, strength and hope" of the participants. There are parallels here with what is known as unconditional love or the kind of love which is defined by Maturana as "constituting the other as a legitimate other in co-existence with you" [4].

There is an antidote to the false pride of the alcoholic which is built into the AA program. It is called anonymity and means much more than protecting one's identity. It denotes self-sacrifice and Bateson considered it to be a profound statement affirming the systemic relationship (of the part with the whole). A form of prayer to one's own higher power - which is an extraordinary self-affirming tautology - also plays a part and the well-known Serenity Prayer of AA ("God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference") stands as the converse of the double bind affliction. The paradox which is inherent in the double bind is the same paradox which exists in the spiritual process of recovery. So the epistemological "error" regarding our relationship to the highest system which concerns us has become the epistemological "truth" which has a life-promoting quality.

## **Towards a new strategy for dealing with ecological problems**

Let us apply the "double surrender" strategy used successfully by AA in the context of social ecology.

The first step is to admit our powerlessness over environmental pollution. By so doing we are trying to extinguish the roots of the most essential

epistemological "error" of mankind- the belief that we are strong enough (god-like) to control nature, to transform and model it according to our desires. There is a direct relationship between the degree of belief in our power to control nature and the degree of pollution and destruction this control produces. We act upon nature as if we know definitely how to behave with regard to it. And this belief in our thinking and desire that we know the truth about what to do and what not to do is a pollution which is much more serious than the physical pollution produced by our actions. It is a pollution of our mind. By recognising it we are making our first step in the direction to the psychospiritual shift.

The second step is to acknowledge some higher Power which is much stronger than the force propelling our continual drive towards new technologies - it is this Power which could help us to survive and save life on our planet. What is the "Power greater than ourselves"? Is it the acknowledgment that WE create our knowledge and understanding? We do not have access to the absolute knowledge of good and evil. What we have, what we can do, is of our own construction. The surrender to the "Power greater than ourselves" is a surrender to not knowing, or being able to know, the real truth. By surrendering to that power, we tie the "double bind" in a similar way to the AA situation, involving our minds in a paradox, whose resolution inevitably has a psychospiritual dimension.

We are in the process of applying the "double surrender" approach in a very concrete practical context: to develop and test strategies aimed at achieving a negotiated outcome in ecological issues of high societal risk. The ecological issues relate to water and waste management problems in the Hawkesbury City region, which focus the community "outrage". The sides of negotiation are: (a) regulatory agencies with decision-making authority on water and waste issues, who have management responsibility for human and environmental health, (b) environmental groups and individuals with a significant stake in water and waste issues and insufficient impact on how these issues are resolved, (c) individuals who do not perceive themselves to be seeking input into water and waste issues but might be responsive to outreach and education, (d) main "polluters" as organisations and groups of people presenting the most essential sources of pollution in the considered geographical area.

Each of the negotiation sides is invited to share with others its state of knowledge, attitude and responsibility on the water and waste issues; no one side is blamed or anathematised for its behaviour - we all are "polluted", we all are polluters. We all recognise and surrender to the reality as it is; moreover, we accept it as it is. There is no need to feel guilty, no feeling of supremacy over the nature in and out -side us. We are going to have to trust each other. It is not the fight against each other and against the nature, that will bring us to "harmonious co-existence". It is the benignity to each other and to the nature surrounding us, that would help us to tie the "double bind" of surrender to what we are and to the power which veils the truth and makes us eager to pursue it, and by the same token, to approach the psychospiritual shift which may enlighten the way for solving the ecological enigmas of our days.

The anonymity in the application of "double surrender" strategy has to do with the lack of ownership over any preconceived or subtly imposed negotiation outcome. No one side participating in the negotiation process has any monopoly on a specific way of solving the critical issue. There can be no valid negotiation if any side has a fixed and predetermined outcome. We respect and accept the opinions of every side and by a profound understanding of these opinions, we "drift" together to what unites us and makes us happy.

By using the described strategy we are surely on the way to a better understanding of the language which the Aborigines have established with nature, and to reveal the secrets of its powerful metaphors. This language appears to have been created by them in a spiritual surrender to their creative Ancestors and it appears to have helped them to survive. Through an understanding of this language humanity may improve its chances of survival and its prospects of a better life.

## References

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[4] H.R. Maturana, 1991, Personal Communication.