Shadowing the Anthropocene: Eco-Realism for Turbulent Times

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The long revolution

This book has argued for a realism that acknowledges the ultimate unsustainability of current human systems of living on this planet. Some, of course, are more sustainable than others, and there is even a reasonable chance that we, or some version of us anthropomorphs, will make it through the current sustainability bottleneck. But in the end we will all get buried.

Is this realism a form of cosmic pessimism? I don’t think so.

C.S. Peirce’s whole philosophical work was an extended argument for an expanded concept of reason. Reason, for Peirce, was rooted in human nature and in nature itself; it is a development of the very process of making meaning that is the essence of all living things (and, Peirce would say, all things living or not). Reason grows out of intuitive common sense — the hunches that Peirce labeled “abduction,” which supplement and ground the better-known processes of induction and deduction. As logical reasoning, it is rooted, furthermore, in aesthetics and ethics — the capacity to cultivate habits of perception and relation commensurate with the habits of reason that beckon to us through our efforts to know the universe. And reason develops through dialogue and increasingly refined communication into something that is shared across a community of reasoning beings.
Peirce of course is not a Cartesian. He does not believe in a division between mind and matter, soul and body, reason and passion. This brings him closer in spirit to those—Buddhists, Daoists and neo-Confucians, Sufis and Catholic integral ecologists (like Pope Francis), and others—for whom reason is subordinate to the heart, that organ of perception by which we feel the solidarity of those whose sentience (like ours) appears and disappears on a sea of interdependent relationality.

The following quote from Peirce is the kind of thing that gives me hope:

Inanimate things do not err at all; and the lower animals very little. Instinct is all but unerring; but reason in all vitally important matters is a treacherous guide. This tendency to error, when you put it under the microscope of reflection, is seen to consist of fortuitous variations of our actions in time. But it is apt to escape our attention that on such fortuitous variation our intellect is nourished and grows. For without such fortuitous variation, habit-taking would be impossible; and intellect consists in a plasticity of habit.¹

In other words, reason alone is risky, and it is often better to go with our instinct. But it is because we can err that we can learn, and because learning is possible, learning will ultimately occur, however long it may take.

Other process-relational philosophers have conjured up other driving forces to the cosmic process—something that would account for a built-in “upward” trend in the universe. For the

Whitehead of *Process and Reality*, it was a dipolar God who acts as a “poet of the world” and “fellow sufferer”: a God who “spurs” the universe forward in his “primordial nature” by acting as a divine “lure” for the envisagement of all aesthetic value possibilities, and who in his “consequent nature” saves and enjoys every vestige of every heartfelt struggle. In Whitehead’s next major book, however, he dropped the deity and replaced it with a non-theistic “Eros of the Universe” which serves as “the living urge towards all possibilities,” and with “the Unity of Adventure,” or “an Adventure in the Universe as One,” which “embraces all particular occasions” and “claims” the “goodness” of the realization of their possibilities. “In this Supreme Adventure,” he wrote, “the Reality which the Adventure transmutes into its Unity of Appearance, requires the real occasions of the advancing world each claiming its due share of attention. This Appearance, thus enjoyed, is the final Beauty with which the Universe achieves its justification.”

There are more down to earth variations of “realistic optimism” to choose from. Novelist and cultural historian Raymond Williams referred to the faith that things are moving, however chaotically (or dialectically), towards a better human future, as the “long revolution.” Williams was a socialist, and the optimism of his particular formulation may not ring as true today as it did for him sixty years ago. It is interesting, however, that Williams wasn’t just intending this as a description of change; he was also aiming to cultivate an attitude toward that change. “In naming the great process of change the long revolution,” he wrote, “I am trying to learn assent to it, an adequate assent of mind and spirit. I find increasingly that the values and meanings I need are all in this process of change.”

If, as this book has tried to suggest, and as Peirce, Whitehead, and many new ontologists and speculative realists have argued,

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the social and the natural are not opposed to each other but are integrally, if complexly, intertwined, then there is something beyond socialism that would be a good description of Peirce’s long-term optimism. A socialist in this understanding is a believer in the eventual triumph of an ever better, more just and more sustainable social world. A naturalist, by the same token, would be a believer in the eventual triumph of an ever more beautifully evolved natural world. (The Darwin of The Origin of Species is one of our better representatives of the latter view.) Peirce would instead be something like a cosmist (and there was a tradition of Russian thought by that name which envisioned things rather similarly), or a cosmopolist, a believer that the cosmos itself is evolving toward something better, more complete, or more fully harmonized. In that evolution, sociality and reason play important, and increasing, roles, but never in separation from nature.

Such an “even longer revolution” may take many deep, dark turns along the way. Contrary to what our human pride suggests, it may shed civilizations, even worlds (not to mention species like our own), in the process. Peirce seemed to believe that those, too, will be redeemed in the end — that, to paraphrase Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, they, too, will have their homecoming festivals. That is a leap of faith that might be difficult for those without experience conforming to it. But there are forms of logo-ethico-aesthetic practice (such as those outlined in Part Two of this book) that aim explicitly to engender such experience.

With his insistence that habits are to be cultivated, Peirce belongs to the class of believers in the practice of cosmopolism, or the practice of William Connolly’s “immanent naturalism” — that is, the cultivation of a better, more reasonable, more ethically satisfying, and more beautiful universe by the universe itself, which fortunately includes us within it. Just as the ontological constructivism of Whitehead, Stengers, and Latour is broader and more capacious than social constructionism, so this cosmopolism is more capacious than socialism as heretofore understood. In the end, its vision is very much a social vision, but its sociality is extended, deepened, and redefined by
the deepest withdrawals of dark matter we can imagine. It is a faith in what is unencompassable by faith itself. It is a realism that believes in a reality that supersedes and outwits all our ideas about it — believes in it not only intellectually, but emotionally and spiritually. And it believes in its goodness, “assents” to it “in mind and spirit,” as Williams would have it.

Will such a faith help us respond to the refugee emergencies that are and will be arising all around us as climatic and ecological crises continue to deepen? The refugees are not only our fellow humans — Syrians, Iraqis, Somalis, Bangladeshis, Haitians, Maldivians, and others. They are also Gaia’s vast proletariat of threatened nonhumans, whose abodes are being demolished, destroyed, and abandoned in the wake of the growing emergency. To deal with them adequately, we will need all the resources we can muster. One of those is the faith in responsiveness itself, “agapistic” responsiveness, as Peirce would call it. Because that is what grows the universe into the new folds that are worth growing into.

Of times and beyond time

In a literal sense, a revolution is nothing spectacular: it is an Event, but viewed in the context of time, it is mere turbulence. It may be a reclaiming, an overturning, an upheaving of things that needed to be upheaved. But in the solar time of planetary circling (or the growth rings of trees), a revolution is just a measurement of one.

So it is worth pondering three kinds of time in which we find ourselves in this time of the AnthropoCapitalocene.

First, there is chronological time, the time of Chronos, which is the time that dates, that punctuates, that traces causes and orders them into their sequence. This time finds us constantly pursued by our own demise: one moment replaced by another, all of them subjected to the indifferent measure of a universal timekeeper. The Anthropocene, measured thus, is a matter for scientists to probe and debate. Its significance is that we will be measured to our fate as a layer among layers, a fate to be deter-
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mined by Saturn, who oversees this time. We will be subject to the exhaustion that comes to all things in their own time. That is the sobering realization at the heart of our realism, which recognizes the mundane fatedness of itself alongside that of all things: the fatedness to pass (while passing on something, nevertheless). An era, a revolution, a turning, to be followed by the next, and the next.

A different kind of time is that of Aion, who is the god that takes the measure of *our* time and installs it within the sacred time of eternity. This is the time of our destiny, our world-historical significance, but it is a time that cannot be known in advance unless we are willing to give the game away at the outset. The Anthropocene, rightly considered as a minor block of time in earth history, is nevertheless an achievement, whose ultimate significance we can only guess at. If Chronos measures the time of “one thing after another,” the time of determining but blind secondness, Aion is the time of qualitative thirdness, the time of significance that may or may not be determined in advance.

But before and between them, there is the time of Kairos. Kairotic time is the time of possibility, a time we can only intuit when we engage with the timeliness of the moment. What action can we take right now? What action is appropriate to this moment? This is the time of firstness, in which we must forget ourselves in order to hear the call of the *kairoi*, the gods who beckon us toward a new creative advance.4

While acknowledging the times of Chronos and of Aion, it is the time of Kairos that I have favored in my negotiation with our time(s). Without the Kairotic, any process-relational ontology risks becoming the predigested stew of “one occurrence after another,” one thing turning into another, as the universe churns forward in the turning of its wheels. Alternative to chronological forward motion, there is the cyclical time of organisms, seasons, lives (births and deaths) and, yes, revolutions. Aionic

4 I am grateful to Michel Weber and Matthew Segall for provoking my thinking on these three temporalities, even if my interpretation differs from each of theirs.
time is Zodiacal time, the movement of the wheels across the qualitatively rich, archetypally anchored heavens. It is the time of gods, but precisely those whose time is eternal. It is the time of Whitehead’s “eternal objects.” Kairotic time, by contrast, is discontinuous and ruptured: it is the time that always remains open. Kairotic time is premised on the leap of faith in a future that is neither determined nor determinable. It is the time of now.

We will, of course, be buried. Dorion Sagan manages a note of sober optimism in his evocation of the Cyanocene, the era he playfully (if darkly) envisions as following the Anthropocene. “We should worry,” he urges, “but not despair.” This is because the “rock record shows that after each mass extinction, the organically interweaving biosphere has regrown to form more species, cell types, metabolic skills, areas settled, networked intelligences, and complex sensory skills than before. Maybe this time, instead of hurting it,” Sagan suggests, “we can help it continue its multispecies energy-transducing recycling ways for billions of years more.”

We have options. We do not even have ourselves, a viable “we,” yet, but it is an option for us to work toward one, a workable demos of some sort or other. We are poised at a bifurcation point, if we opt to take ourselves that way. And we certainly have many others, companions and secret agents, to work with, to work for, and to work alongside.

And no matter how beautifully, if fleetingly, we succeed, and how miserably we fail (for fail we must), there are many good planets in the universe besides ours. They will get their try as well. And their own homecoming festivals.

But there is no better time for action than now.

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