

# Jon Goodbun: On the Possibility of an Ecological Dialogue

by Jon Goodbun

The call for environmental justice, and the recognition that the effects of environmental change will be played out through class, gender, race and neo-colonial structures, articulates an essential socialisation and politicisation of what is at stake in thinking through our responses to ecological crisis.

However, any demand for environmental justice must be accompanied by a certain mourning, as there will be – in a basic sense – no justice. There will be no reckoning, no making good. There are clear culprits – individuals, classes and corporations – responsible for the production of the uneven relations of scarcity and power which are absolutely structural to the operational behaviour of capitalism, and we should demand some kind of justice in navigating towards futures beyond this economic form. It is just that a simple restitution is generally impossible, for obvious reasons.

There is another scale of ecological thought which suggests that the very concept of environmental justice, the very idea of a reckoning, is not just ultimately impossible, but is itself an environmental problem. The ecological anthropologist Gregory Bateson identified an “epistemological error” that tends to permeate through systems in the manner of “an ecology of weeds”. When goals are set by an instrumental conscious purpose based upon a necessarily partial viewpoint, and unmediated by a wider eco-systemic awareness, all kinds of pathologies play out. In his account, the various myths, stories, rituals, religious practices and the like found in non-capitalist and pre-capitalist societies provided a kind of meta-aesthetic learning environment for thought, which was in some way formally isomorphic with the communicational relations within the ecosystems that were the environment for human action. These myths and rituals acted as a dampening force, regulating the exponential amplifying potential that unmediated conscious purpose and its power structures can have upon wider ecosystems. Under the fragmenting force of capitalist practices and

divisions of labour, many of these pre-capitalist meta-aesthetic structures were destroyed.

Today, law, in its modern separation from wider meta-aesthetic form, is limited in its ecological imaginary (it can think about environments, but not environmentally). This means that when we use it out-of-context, in for example simplistically “choosing sides” to shape apparently progressive socio-ecological priorities and goals, we risk unleashing new waves of unforeseen environmental violence and pathology. Complex ecological systems are, in their essential logos – their communicational structures and content – beyond good and evil, and we still don’t really have the tools and concepts for managing our conscious purpose in this condition.

How then, do we proceed? The situation is not as completely hopeless as it may seem. Perhaps it is in observing the very relation between the demand for environmental justice and the mourning of its impossibility – within that double bind – that we can find the route to ecological wisdom, a route to a more aesthetic, what is in fact even, if carefully defined, a more sacred sense of ecological justice. This then, is not a lament about the pointlessness of struggle, but rather a call for multiple levels of activism and a new kind of environmental dialogue.

Recent ecocide law and environmental justice activism has had a significant engagement with at least the first half of this double-bind – the impossibility of any simple justice – and has developed an important and still evolving conception of a more systemic restorative or regenerative justice, typically developed through dialogue between all of the actors involved. This dialogue is perhaps key to evolving a new ecological language. The physicist David Bohm, in his later work on the possibility of a verb-based process language – the rheomode – and in his various engagements with non-western and indigenous forms of science – developed an understanding of dialogue as a conversational form grounded in active listening. Noting that “discussion” shares a common root to percussion and concussion, and indeed means to break things up for competitive analysis, the root meaning of “dialogue” – through (dia-) the logos – suggests, according to Bohm, a “stream of meaning flowing among

and through us and between us” and can facilitate a more collective wisdom beyond the fragmentation of argumentative discussion.

A version of Bohmian dialogue has been adopted as the organisational form of the Extinction Rebellion movement, and furthermore has been presented as an anarcho-autonomist alternative to both representational and plebiscite democratic forms. As a practice which can bring together the multiple voices through which environments articulate themselves, dialogue does have a meta-aesthetic potential. There are a series of concepts which might help us to use dialogue to elaborate an environmental architecture pedagogy and practice. Bateson developed research methods of “double-description” and “metalogues”, arguing that perceiving the patterns which connect living systems – essential for not breaking those relations – requires working with multiple views of the world. This method has been extended in recent years by radical anthropologists such as Eduardo de Viveiros de Castro and Eduardo Kohn, through various multi-perspectivist approaches. Such methods typically draw upon Bateson’s and C. S. Peirce’s conception of abductive reasoning, a method which constructs a semiotic structure out of orders of relations-between-relations, and can be worked on, through Bateson’s famous abductive provocation: “What is the pattern that connects the crab to the lobster, the orchid to the primrose, both of them to me, and me to you?”

This abductive challenge demands an aesthetic reasoning. It can only be approached through a perception of scales of relations. Clearly, aesthetics – often seen as a distraction from environmental concerns, does not mean a design style or anything like that in the sense used above, but rather the study of structures of feeling and perception: How do we perceive what we perceive? How do we empathise with, or feel alienated from (which in fact is the same thing), the patterns and processes which connect all living and mental systems? Aesthetics – which is “in” both subject and object as perception and form, is always an ecological aesthetic. Can we find an abductive reasoning in the pattern which connects the need to demand environmental justice, and the recognition of its impossibility? Can we really perceive the form of the scales of our environmental crisis? The futures of our more-than-purposive environmental dialogues depend upon it.