

Essay: In your view, how far could Neo-Platonic philosophy inform contemporary thinking around ecological sustainability?

Introduction

The issue of ecological sustainability in today's world is complex and far-reaching. So for the purposes of this essay, before considering the potential influence of Neo-Platonic thinking on current worldviews, the notion of sustainability needs to be contextualized.

The challenge of sustaining life on planet Earth

There is no neat definition; but a useful starting point may be the following comments in a paper by environmental studies professor, David W. Orr: "The overall challenge of sustainability is to avoid crossing irreversible thresholds that damage the life systems of Earth while creating long-term economic, political, and moral arrangements that secure the wellbeing of present and future generations." (Orr: 2003)

Fifteen years later, in August 2018 it seems more and more certain that some thresholds estimated by environmental scientists as vital to ensure ecological safety, notably in respect of climate change and global warming, may soon, or already have been crossed. The physical effects on many forms of life on this planet will most likely be distributed unevenly, both time-wise and geographically, but, as noted in a recent paper by Dr. Jem Bendell of the Institute of Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS) at the University of Cumbria, the ramifications are often non-linear, suggesting: "both that impacts will be far more rapid and severe than predications based on linear projections and that the changes no longer correlate with the rate of anthropogenic carbon emissions. In other words – 'runaway climate change'."

Bendell concludes from his own assessment of a wide range of very recent scientific and intergovernmental research reports that "human societies will experience disruptions to their basic functioning within less than 10 years due to climate stress. Such disruptions include increased levels of malnutrition, starvation, disease, civil conflict and war – and will not avoid affluent nations. This situation makes redundant the reformist approach to sustainable development and related fields of corporate sustainability." (Bendell: 2018)

What might be yet sustained?

As Bendell himself acknowledges, the findings of different experts on various aspects of ecological sustainability - or demise - are contentious and tend to elicit a wide range of emotional reactions from dismissal to denial to terror. The risk of social turmoil and conflict is greatly amplified in what is fast becoming a VUCA World (US military term for an operating environment which is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous). Technology or science are unlikely to produce practical solutions to the crises, nor will political leaders provide necessary psychological reassurances to hold deep emotional anxiety. As a potential coping strategy, Bendell proposes a “Deep Adaptation” approach, seeking norms and behaviours that human societies will need to maintain, i.e. resilience, relinquishment and restoration. And what may also be useful is rediscovering what humanity might learn from the past that could nurture life in post-collapse or emergency scenarios.

David Orr emphasizes the need for spiritual renewal in his presentation on the challenges of sustainability. Science alone cannot provide justification for sustaining life; nor can returning to “some simplistic religious faith of an earlier time”. What is needed, according to Orr, is a spirituality “founded on a higher order of awareness that honors mystery, science, life, and death.”

What might neoplatonist philosophy offer today's world?

Turning to the question of the potential relevance of neo-Platonic philosophy to the challenges of ecological sustainability today, let us first review some of the key influences and actors.

The emergence of new enquiries into Platonic thinking from late Antiquity through to the pre-Enlightenment period – notably in Italy during the 15th and 16th centuries - related to perennial human questions on the meaning of life offers the opportunity to plunge into what scholar Frances Yates calls “a genealogy of a wisdom tradition which led in an unbroken chain to Plato” and “the return to a pure golden age of magic.” (Yates: 1964)

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, academic expert on the topic of Western Esotericism within which the threads of Neo-Platonist thinking are woven, describes how writings retrieved from the early centuries AD re-situated Renaissance philosophers' understanding of Platonism as “a religious worldview with its own mythologies and ritual practices, focused on the attainment of a salvational gnosis (‘knowledge’) by which the human soul could be liberated from its material entanglement and regain its unity with the divine Mind.” (Hanegraaff: 2013)

Influences from Oriental traditions included a series of pagan religious teachings contained in ancient texts attributed to the legendary spiritual and political sage, Hermes Trismegistus, translated in the mid-1400s by the Italian philosopher-priest - Marsilio Ficino. These

Hermetic teachings offered guidance on how humans can re-discover that: “the divine is invisibly present throughout the whole of creation.” (Hanegraaff: 2013) Ficino’s work placed a new focus on the role of magic, alchemy and astrology in spiritual enquiry and was pursued in a similar mode by other Renaissance neo-platonic thinkers such as Pico de la Mirandolla, Cornelius Agrippa and, some years later, by other Italians, Giordano Bruno and Thommaso Campanella.

There is no space in this essay to comment more fully on the extraordinary work undertaken by these philosophers, but clearly they were all fired with what Frances Yates describes as “a new direction of the will towards the world, its marvels, and mysterious workings, a new longing and determination to understand these workings and to operate with them.” (Yates: 1964) This echoes the contemporary rise in emotional engagement and desire of many people today to explore solutions for sustaining a planet whose mysteries inspire deep reverence.

The core notion in Platonic thinking of divine presence as “oneness”, invokes the possibility of humans themselves seeking connection between heaven and earth, spirit and matter, the divine and the profane, through various spiritual channels, including symbols, animated statues, and visions. In a paper on the work of Henry Corbin related to Platonic aspirations to understand life, scholar and writer Angela Voss describes this as being broadly a ‘divine’ mode of revelation as opposed to a ‘human’ mode of investigation. (Voss, 2007)

As Hanegraaff also points out, inherent in the notion of heavenly “Oneness” was the understanding that this was attainable through “the study of nature and its hidden or secret laws and dynamics” (i.e. magic, astrology and alchemy).

A natural magical reconnection?

In *The Philosophy of Magic* (1986) Professor of Religious Studies Arthur Versluis observes: “magic and alchemy are found worldwide, in all traditional cultures – in remarkably similar manifestations – a uniformity which can ultimately only result from the single unifying aim of those cultures: spiritual realization.”

Such mysterious practices are generally rooted in the notion of “linking earth to heaven” and seem to have been widely accepted as complementary to traditional Christianity during the Renaissance period (Hanegraaff, 2013), and in the extensive and intensive exploration of the Hermetic tradition that Frances Yates offers in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. (1994)

As indicated by Versluis, indigenous peoples across the world – including many in western societies who have been speaking out or are being held up as examples of deeper knowledge that needs to be recognized once again - know and live this notion of the connectedness of

earth and the heavens and the interdependence of species and natural organisms as a daily reality. Yet the predominant western worldview of the all-powerful human with dominion over the planet still clings on in the seats of power. So how might this gap be bridged? What are contemporary thinkers drawing from wisdom traditions like neoplatonism?

Brainwaves

The observations of neuro-scientist and writer Iain McGilchrist on the human brain in *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* open new understandings as to why humans – particularly in western societies - perpetuate the belief of dualist thinking that we are separate, rather than a natural part of one whole world, one interconnected life, as the neo-Platonists explored extensively. Western society today would do well to re-visit this in similar breadth and depth if ecological solutions for sustaining the future of life on this planet are to have any effect.

He explains his theory that the brain, divided into two hemispheres – right and left – produces “two fundamentally opposed realities, two different modes of experience; that each is of ultimate importance in bringing about the recognizably human world...” These hemispheres have to work together, however, as McGilchrist observes: “they are in fact involved in a sort of power struggle, and that explains many aspects of contemporary Western culture.” (McGilchrist, 2009)

While cautioning against over-simplistic interpretation and attribution of specific functions to one side or the other, McGilchrist posits: “the right hemisphere pays attention to the Other, whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, with which it sees itself in profound relation. It is deeply attracted to, and given life by, the relationship, the betweenness, that exists with this Other. By contrast, the left hemisphere pays attention to the virtual world that it has created, which is self-consistent, but self-contained, ultimately disconnected from the Other, making it powerful, but ultimately only able to operate on, and to know, itself.” (McGilchrist, 2009)

McGilchrist’s research in this respect helps illustrate human developments through different times and philosophical worldviews. It includes a remarkable description of Renaissance achievements that, in his opinion, thanks to a “fruitful balance in the relation of the hemispheres”, and undoubtedly to a greater flow of influence of right hemisphere functioning than in previous and subsequent eras, opened human consciousness at that time to “experience, initially almost exclusively personal experience, in preference to what is ‘known’ to be the case, the teachings of scholastic theory and received opinion... There was a faithful imitation of, and close attention to, the natural world, and to what other people in other times may have thought or known,” which, he says, again relates to the right hemisphere. (McGilchrist, 2009)

Here then are several pertinent notions for opening up contemporary worldviews to appreciate why greater attention and reverence for the natural world may enhance humans' capacity to balance relationships and interconnectedness and build collaboration in the face of ecological challenges.

Reach for the stars

Astrology brought remarkable insights to Renaissance learning. A 20th century revival of its usefulness as a channel for learning can be seen through the work of depth psychologists C.J. Jung and James Hillman, and scholar of Islamic mysticism, Henry Corbin, who has furthered the notion and practical value of “active imagination” as a means of opening inner vision for this kind of enquiry. Corbin’s work has opened the way to recognizing and valuing human capacity for reconnection with the non-rational mystery of life. (Voss, 2007)

Philosopher and historian Richard Tarnas, a present-day practitioner of astrology, offers a number of examples showing how the study or consultation of this divinatory “science” can enable human beings to become more aware of their place and purpose in the cosmos and reveal a deeper sense of connection to life and a corresponding desire to uphold an ecological way of being. He describes astrology “properly understood, to be uniquely capable of illuminating the inner dynamics of both cultural history and personal biography.” (Tarnas, 2006 p. 490)

Going for gold

The stories of the Renaissance neo-Platonist philosophers offer fascinating examples of an enlivened spiritual fervour and enthusiasm for seeking a new age of gold, not least the vision of Campanella’s City of the Sun that may eventually have found its manifestation in the golden era of Le Roi Soleil, Louis XIV, and his palace at Versailles. (Yates: 1964)

The theme of the search to transform the ordinary into something radiant and precious, picked up by the Renaissance neo-Platonists, is behind the perennial fascination with the mysterious alchemical process. This was also taken up by Jung whose work has contributed to inspiring renewed consideration for the value of symbolism and the understanding that the alchemical ‘philosopher’s’ stone symbolizes “something eternal that some alchemists compared to the mystical experience of God within one’s own soul. It usually takes prolonged suffering to burn away all the superfluous psychic elements concealing the stone. But some profound inner experience of the Self does occur to most people at least once in a lifetime.” (Jung, 1964 p.210))

As above, so below

The work of Henry Corbin in exploring the intuitive ‘imaginal’ capacity of the human mind to “purify and liberate the soul so that it may begin to pick up... the traces of divine meaning behind the appearances of things” (Voss, 2007) is another example that draws on

the Platonic notion of “as above, so below” Voss also remarks on the connection between Corbin’s idea and popular spiritual writer Eckhart Tolle’s notion of “the power of now”, of accepting to be present to whatever arises in each moment knowing that this has a sense in relation to the wider universe.

A cautionary note

However, it is important to be wary of the illusion of quick solutions: the daily newspaper horoscopes do not exactly help to give astrology good press and may simply encourage an assistance mentality for many who do not want to take responsibility in life and just want to hear reassurances that they are safe and secure.

Moreover, messages in the texts of influential esoteric writers such as Hermes Trismegistus or Iamblichus make it clear that humankind must be conscious in its choice to either listen to natural or divine guidance, and find the way back to a sense of “oneness” or to allow the ego to retain control and potentially (mis)use magical means (Voss, 2006 pp.14-20) Again the observations of Iain McGilchrist regarding how the human brain functions in a constant negotiation between left and right hemispheres (McGilchrist, 2009) reinforce this notion of the need for conscious choices.

So what next?

As suggested at the start of this essay, the aspirations of achieving ecological sustainability for much of the planet are growing more and more unlikely and its inhabitants are more likely to see environmental, economic, political and social collapse in many areas much sooner than estimated. This calls for action on a much broader scale than at present and leads to new questions as to how to move from thinking to doing more to build human resilience to cope.

In a 2012 special issue of *Ethics and the Environment*, philosopher Lisa Kretz uses a Platonist analogy as she explores the topic of “Bridging the Theory-Action Gap” in relation to climate change. She asks why the ethical problem of *Akrasia* – the notion of being unwilling to do what one fundamentally knows to be right - discussed by Socrates in Plato’s *Protagoras*, is again a major challenge in the contemporary quest for ecological sustainability. Kretz identifies the need for education to overcome ignorance, but stresses equally the need to foster motivation in order to achieve emotional and ethical engagement to raise a sense of care related to place and community, and ultimately to instigate responsible behaviour and collective activism to trigger social change and political reform.

Finally, contrary to the contemporary worldviews of the desirability of extending life “for ever” through artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, space exploration etc., the Neo-Platonic sense of respect for the natural cycles of life suggests a need for a return to accepting the inevitability of death.

Learning to live with a rumble of panic

David Orr recalls the words of anthropologist and writer Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death* which – it seems to me – complement well the philosophy of the neoplatonists: “Taking life seriously means that whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything.” (Orr: 2003)

The neoplatonist thinkers of the Renaissance period certainly lived with a sense of constant rumbling risk for their own well-being, and had to constantly uphold, defend and even sometimes recant their ideas in the face of the religious and political power structures of the day. Some, like Giordano Bruno, even lost their life. (Voss, 2006 and Yates, 1964) This bears striking parallels to the position of ecologists today – eco-warriors and pacifists alike.

So while concerned people on the planet today continue to explore humans’ capacity to build resilience, relinquish fond memories of diminishing and disappearing natural resources and attempt to restore some sanity to life with what is left available in the moment, Platonist wisdom may indeed enable the rediscovery of heightened consciousness of spiritual values drawn from mystery, science, life and death to help our task.

Reading List

- Bendell, Jem (2018) *Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy*. IFLAS Occasional Paper 2. Available at www.iflas.info. Accessed 25 August 2018)
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