

Is Human Society Evolving in a Sustainable Way?

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Abstract:

In a Phenomenologico-Hermeneutical observation, this essay exposes at one hand the destructive tendency of human in the evolutionary process, and on the other hand a strong urge and search for solutions to survival. Human being is a part of the co-evolution with the rest of the nature. Evolution is not merely mechanical or biological but is to be perceived in a wider sense. "Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow", said Teilhard de Chardin. The Declaration on a Global Ethic, which was signed in September 1993 by those who took part in the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, begins as "Our world is experiencing a fundamental crisis: a crisis in global economy, global ecology, and global politics". This crisis is evidently human made and seems directed to a dangerous disaster. This is what a phenomenological observation reveals. Then, in a critical-hermeneutical approach we look at the reality. Some instances ('de facto') are given to show that we can change the story if willing. Any question of sustainability depends how we take responsibility. It begins from a deep awareness: an awareness of the reality and an awareness of the future. This demands vision, and action. This paper recognizes that combined effort to sustainability calls for politico-economic and environmental concerns. But for that we need to evolve into 'maturity' insisting the need of a sense of the earth, and a wider perspective of reality. Finally this paper observes that the ardent efforts of those who commit themselves for the cause of the human society, and the universe bring optimism. Citing some of those initiatives, this essay reiterates that we must take charge to protect our world. Otherwise nature will do what she has done to most species that have ever lived, and do the job for us.

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Introduction

All creatures and environments co-evolve by changing themselves and one another. Butterflies or elephants cannot evolve without their habitat. And we can only understand ourselves as humans by trying to understand our co-evolution with the rest of nature. Teilhad de Chardin asks, "Is evolution a theory, a system or a hypothesis? It is much more: it is a general condition to which all theories, all hypotheses, as systems must bow and which they must satisfy henceforth if they are to be thinkable and true. Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow." (1961, p. 219). He was excited to say that evolution approaches an 'Omega Point'. But from the point of view of my observations of our society and its unbalanced aggressiveness, it seems approaching a disastrous end (the enormous amount of nuclear war heads will suffice to come to this conclusion). With this in mind, how can I say a definitive yes to the question 'Is human society evolving in a sustainable way?' However, I will try to make a 'responding' to such an issue rather than answering, because the word 'answer' seems to imply a more or less complete and exhaustive conclusion 'once and for all'. Hence, I will try to focus my attention on the mystery that is our human society from the methodology of phenomenology and critical hermeneutics. That is, we will observe the facts concerning our society and its reality and take a stand involving the moment of critical hermeneutics.

A brief phenomenological observation

Let me make an observation with an effort to imagine the evolution of human society from some comfortable vantage point. First we see small groups of humans evolving in dense forests in the warmer areas of the Earth. Using the resources of their environment, they begin to make things that are of use to them; they learn to control fire for warmth and cooking, and to carry live embers from place to place. They began multiplying and spreading out as they follow food and water supplies. Eventually their food supplies draw them to all the continents. Some remain tribal hunter-gatherers or nomads while others begin the settling process we call civilization. However there were self-creating, self-balancing eco systems.

Then we see the larger agricultural economies overrun by tribes of wandering nomads and hunters from harsher climates, armed with weapons, taking them over, establishing dominance systems of males over females, rulers over those ruled. Empires began to evolve. Wars are fought and goods traded, built networks of land and sea paths that connect human societies with one another. Along these paths, news, ideas, and stories flow together with people and their products, animals, seeds, microbes. The borders around kingdoms and empires change; continents are mapped into countries; human populations grow and divide into ever more languages and cultures. More and more land is taken for human use. The old

self-creating, self-balancing ecosystems are destroyed as natural plants are cut or burned, their animals driven off, both replaced by human-bred monoculture crops and livestock, as well as by walled cities of stone and brick. Cities crowd more and more people together in artificial environments; raw materials are transported to the city centers from more and more distant places, while the products manufactured from these materials flow outward again toward markets.

Wars are fought on an ever-larger scale, ever farther from home, and involving greater numbers of people spending longer times in strange countries. Wars drive technology and industrialization to new heights, especially through the development of an enormous fossil fuel economy that spawns vehicles on land, airplanes in the sky and ever more ships crossing seas. More resources are dug and stripped from the Earth than ever before.

Technology evolves faster that replaces old methods to new, machines and tools replaces human hands. Television and computer network brought faraway places to each corner of the world. Mines and quarries have been dug deep into the Earth and scratched out of its surface, their stone, metal ores, and fossil fuels transformed into human products. Portable phones provide not only communication but also safety and security. Ideology spread, capitalism won, and development became absolute. Yet, more than 600 million people suffer from malnutrition, 15 million infants die each year from hunger and related causes, while approximately half the entire population of the earth goes to bed not having had enough to eat. 'World cup football' became world celebration, but those footballs were made by child labor in poorer countries.

Humans dreaming for bigger and higher leaped to space; satellites began controlling human life on earth. Space has become an increasingly important arena for military operations. For the moment, space is non-weaponised, however, this situation may soon change. A number of countries, including Russia, China and the US, are reported to already be developing anti-satellite weapons. In January 2001 The Commission to Assess United States National Security Space Management and Organization, chaired by Donald Rumsfeld, now US Secretary of Defense, recommended that "the US Government should vigorously pursue the capabilities called for in the National Space Policy to ensure that the President will have the option to deploy weapons in space to deter threats to and, if necessary, defend against attack on US interests."

Nuclear energy is a product of war - two atomic bombs are blown up in warfare, deliberately destroying a part of man's own civilization. Others are blown up as tests, destroying and polluting ecosystems, raining fallout from the atmosphere worldwide. There are currently about 31,000 nuclear warheads deployed or in reserve in the stockpiles of eight

countries: China, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Of these about 13,000 are deployed and 4,600 of these are on high alert, i.e. ready to be launched within minutes notice. The combined explosive yield of these weapons is approximately 5,000 megatons, which is about 200,000 times the explosive yield of the bomb used on Hiroshima. The peaceful use of nuclear energy proves dangerous as well, with accidents creating radiation sickness and damaging foodstuffs.

Statistics confirm the fact that we are at present exterminating approximately one hundred species a day to the fact that we are destroying the world's tropical forests at the rate of one football field per second. In 1994 Robert Kaplan noted 'a world on fire' documenting the devastating reality of desperate poverty imposed on peoples in Africa, Asia and South America. Wildfires roared through drought-ridden American states recently, threatening California's giant sequoias. Wayward monsoon and freaky weather over various parts of the world portend devastating climate changes as a result of global warming. Studies say that glaciers in the Himalayas will recede by 2020 causing floods and then deserts. By 2015, rise in sea levels will drown parts of Asia's coastal area; productivity of rice and wheat crops will drop; warmer climate will cause major health problems. All nations will be hit. The US will be a dust bowl and Bangladesh will be swamped (12 Aug.2002,*India Today*).

We can infer thus that the planet is headed for disaster, and it is now possible for the first time in human history, that owing entirely to manmade circumstances, not one of us will survive to tell the tale. In destroying the earth we are committing a slow and gruesome suicide. It is beginning to understand the threat of exhaustion or irreversible pollution of natural waters, fossil fuels, and other supplies; to recognize its power to destroy the whole human world and force the planet into new paths of evolution; an extinction progressing more rapidly than any before it, even that caused by sudden meteor impact sixty million years ago. It is the first extinction caused by a single species. Do we see the enemy now?

De facto

Researches and other investigations reveal the fact that we make our future sustainable or not. The following instances are to show some implications that are manifest in different fields to begin our reflection.

- Countries that grow food crops for export to industrial nations, often do not grow enough food for their own populations, many have starving people. India, Bangladesh, and some countries of North Africa, for example, have suffered starvation during years in which their food exports were at their greatest height. So much of their productive agricultural land is devoted to export crops that the very people hired to grow these crops have insufficient land

for their own crop needs.

- The World Bank has admitted its failure in funding the making of deserts where they had intended gardens.
- In Nagano Prefecture, Japan, Mayor Tanaka's reconsideration of the proposed dams in the prefecture (a challenge to political agenda of our time) attracted controversy as well as great popular support. In Chile, a study showed that more energy could be saved through energy efficiency measures than would be produced by six new dams being built on the Bio Bio River, yet the project continues.
- The United States stood on the sidelines as 178 countries agreed on a plan to salvage the Kyoto Protocol on global warming — which the U.S. refuses to ratify or fund.
- BBC film team John Seymour and Herbert Girardet asked a California tomato farmer why he grew tomatoes for his family in a special kitchen garden when he had thousands of acres of them. He replied that if they understood what agricultural poisons were built into every cell of every tomato grown in his fields - his kitchen garden was organic - they would neither ask that question nor ever eat another canned tomato in their lives! He then explained how he was trapped in this method of production by deep indebtedness for machinery, chemicals, irrigation and the need to meet contract quotas.
- 'Silent valley' (India), identified as among the top10 biodiversity spots in the world, was saved by the peoples' power from a proposed hydel power project in 1980; and now the valley's pristine forests are there for generations to admire, and act as inspiration let nature be.
- While the affluent world can eat whatever they want from anywhere in the world year round, arable land is being destroyed and eroded by unsustainable practices and ever-larger non-affluent populations are ever hungrier.

After studying twenty-one collapsed civilizations, historian Arnold Toynbee's observed that what they had in common was inflexibility under stress and the concentration of wealth into few hands. Will we remain inflexible in maintaining a system that concentrates wealth to the increasing detriment of most humans?

Dialogue between achievements and sustainability

The phrase Sustainable Evolution sounds good, but what does it mean? The word sustainability is defined in various disciplines. "Treating the world as if we intended to stay"(Crispin Tickell) is a better definition for our purpose. It is indisputable that scientific and technological developments provide ever-increasing opportunities to better the conditions of life of peoples and nations. The positive aspects of human development are to be acknowledged. Conveniences and pleasure are not the mere result of science and technology; neither the destructive capacity of atomic energy. There is constructive role of all these developments and

growth. Discoveries and inventions have been serving human life from various levels. Food materials and health care has improved consistently. Growth in communication and transportation has made human relations abundant.

While accepting all achievements that human have made, R J Rummel will suffice to make my point. He said, "I suspect that the death toll from infanticide must exceed that from mass sacrifice and perhaps even outright mass murder". This kind of terrible influence and effect of human action can be disastrous. The implications above show that the story can be changed if willing. Sustainable evolution requires a meeting between human and the environment, as developmental economists would say: "We now know that what unites us is vastly more important than what divides us. We recognize that poverty, environmental degradation and population growth are inextricably related and that none of these fundamental problems can be successfully addressed in isolation. We will succeed or fail together. Arriving at a commonly accepted definition of 'sustainable development' remains a challenge for all the actors in the development process."(cit. in Puthenkalam[2001],p.129) In essence, sustainable evolution is a process of change in which the orientation of technological development, environmental resources, human interests are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human existence.

A Critical-Hermeneutical appraisal

A critical-hermeneutical approach should help us understand the meaning and explaining human role in an evolutionary process. In order to make it easy to understand, let me play out an analogy or metaphor-comparing our body with the great body where we are united (Teilhard uses biological metaphors to describe human society- for instance "Earth with a single organized membrane"). Here we regard nations and multinational corporations as organs systems such as bone, blood, muscle, and digestive organ systems, by seeing shipping routes that carry supplies and products as blood and lymph systems; communications networks that spread information and ideas as a nervous system. Consider economics and politics - the ways in which we manage our products and ourselves.

Economic and political sustainability

We are in a complicated system of free market Globalization. Using the metaphor imagine, for example, raw material blood cells are produced inside bones all over the body, just as raw materials are produced in supplier countries all over our world. The raw material blood cells are then transported to the 'northern industrial' lungs, where the blood is purified and oxygen and nutrients are added, making it a useful product. But imagine the announcement of the heart distribution center, "Today's body price for blood is such-and-such. Who will buy?

Some of the bones in which the raw material blood cells are produced can't afford the oxygen-rich blood they need to stay healthy. But rather than lower their prices, the industrial organs destroy the surplus blood that no one can afford to buy, or put it in storage, hoping to sell it later. Bone cells begin to die of starvation. The starving bones would soon affect the whole body, making it unhealthy, crippling or even killing it.

Well, it is obvious that a few organs of our body will not exploit the rest of the body. But it is not the case with the market economies. The UN tells us that our food supplies are presently enough for all humans to eat well, but industrial countries own or control the bulk of food supplies, and they can set prices for the world market. Rather than let prices go down by flooding the market with food, they hoard or destroy surplus food and pay farmers in their own countries to stop producing, while huge numbers of humans go hungry.

"Sanctions are the economic nuclear bomb", said Mairead Maguire, Nobel Peace Laureate, returning from a March 1999 visit to Iraq. People who are not hungry are also less angry. Much warfare including terrorism in our modern world is a result of conflict between rich and poor and discrimination of minorities. Even though our products, including our food, originate all over the world, we do not share fairly the means of their production or their distribution.

One of the sustainability issues we hear about is overpopulation. The population goes up by more than 70 million extra people added each year. Urban population growth is three times that of rural. Overpopulation in poor countries was attributed to poverty and family insecurity. Overpopulation, like other social problems, occurs when communities in sound ecological balance with their surrounding world are destroyed and that balance is lost. Population discussions must address the problem of resource over-consumption by a few. Inequality, oppression, bigotry, and antagonism make every other form of enmity. We must also ask: How can the body of humanity function if half of its cells suppress the full expression of the other half? Equal training and selecting of women in preserving the health of our society is fundamentally necessary. Decision making process needs therefore greater vision of a sustainable future.

It is obvious that a living body can be healthy only if its systems function cooperatively. The solution, except in times of emergency, is not to give away surpluses to the hungry, but to redistribute the arable land so that they can feed themselves. As long as human economics remains more competitive than cooperative, we hold up progress toward the evolution of the body of humanity.

Environmental Sustainability

Crispin Tickell laments that the health of the planet as a whole is endangered. He points out that the deterioration of land quality and accumulation of waters are grave problems. Soil degradation is estimated to affect over two billion hectares worldwide. According to UNESP, 65% of all arable land may have already lost some biological and physical functions. And disposal of the mounting volume of waste we produce could become an ever-bigger problem.

Pollution is still worse, both water and air. Fish and other species are affected. UN Food and Agriculture Organization indicate that at least 60% of world fisheries are fully exploited or over fished. The number of people who will face severe water problems will be three billion by 2050. Damage to ecosystems is already extensive and the future course of evolution will be substantially changed by current human activity. Living species have been destroyed at a high rate. The number of endangered or threatened species listed by International Union for the Conservation of Nature has dramatically increased. And our role is to be challenged in the climate change, depletion of ozone layer, deforestation etc.

People do recognize that the discussion of sustainability has to do with changing the way things are and that it is linked to concern for the environment. Many people are afraid it means ecology at the expense of economy (that is to say pitting the survival of endangered species, for example, against jobs and development!). It is also important to accept a living earth. Not only there are living beings on earth, but a living earth. If we accept the notion of the living Earth, and the body of humanity as an integral part of it, then we have no choice but to implement a healthy sustainable world. This calls for a life, "an environmentally responsible pattern of life" as Al Gore in *Earth in The Balance* demands.

Evolution to maturity

Human beings are an integral part of the earth system. It is relatively easy to convey the message that population increase, deterioration of land, air and water quality, climate change and the rest carry enormous dangers. But protection of the diversity of life is much more difficult. According to Tickell it is not a sentimental question of birds, butterflies and warm furry mammals. It relates to life itself.

We apparently tend to believe that the current diversity of life and the climate around us will only change within narrow limits. But this is an illusion and we must ask whether we can regard ourselves as free to exterminate so many of our companions on the living planet whether they are of use to us or not. With regard to values there are different attitudes, even

conflicting ideologies. However, a mature understanding of the reality, an evolution to maturity is called for. Otherwise we will continue to exploit the nature for our economic interests. If we humbly seek help from the nature that spawned us, we will find biological clues to solving all our biggest problems.

Evolution to responsibility

‘Survival of the fittest’ is the rule of the Darwinian bio-evolutionary theory. And the classical evolutionists were progressivists. But for Marvin Harris [1968](cited in Sanderson [1990]) much of human history over the past 10,000 years has been a record of regression rather than progress. More over, the vary nature of the most powerful constraints that operate on human societies has made it difficult for humans in most societies to do much more than struggle vigorously to keep the quality of life from getting worse. He says that what has motivated the majority of evolutionists in both biology and the social sciences to embrace the concept of progress cannot be justified, because the criterion of progress proposed are- that of the sheer expansion of life itself- is an entirely subjective criterion of personal values.

According to Giddens [1981] an important objection to social evolutionary theories is that it is an extreme form of objectivism that gives no role whatever to humans as agents of history. Evolutionary theories see history as “subject less”-as is occurring “behind the backs” of its participants (p.212). This subjectlessness somehow shows irresponsibility in particular human roles. There arises a call for taking responsibility in all human participation: to keep the earth, the human society alive.

Evolution to a sense of the Earth

We are now becoming more aware the concept of human agency a central role in the evolution as such, and responsible for sustainability. "The phrase 'Sense of the Earth' should be understood to mean the passionate concern for our common destiny which draws the thinking part of life ever further onward. The only truly natural and real human unity is the spirit of the Earth (Elisabet Sahtouris). The sense of Earth is the irresistible pressure that will come at the right moment to unite humankind in a common passion.

Cultivating an ecological consciousness, the insight that everything is connected is a basic step, which Jack Forbes explains as perceiving ourselves as “being deeply bound together with other people and with the surrounding nonhuman forms of life in a complex interconnected web of life, that is to say a true community. All creatures and things are brothers and sisters. From this idea comes the basic principle of non-exploitation, of respect and reverence for all creatures.” (cited in Wilber [1995]p.5-6) To this end, Teilhard suggested

that the Earth in its evolutionary unfolding was growing a new organ of consciousness, called the noosphere. The noosphere is analogous on a planetary level to the evolution of the *cerebral cortex* in humans. The noosphere is a “planetary thinking network” -an interlinked system of consciousness and information, a global net of self-awareness, instantaneous feedback, and planetary communication.

Individual initiatives

Human endeavors to protect this earth, and support the weak and to heal the world is hard to be ignored. There are plenty of examples of people urging for a peaceful world and protesting against all exploitations. The ‘Earth Summit’ in Johannesburg recently witnessed the power of NGOs, groups and individuals against the arrogant possessiveness of the powerful. The initiatives of League of Nations and the UN are attempts against destructive tendencies. Throughout the world, despite disappointments, many work steadfastly for greater humanity. I would elaborate an episode of an individual initiative that aims to this reality in a grass root level.

Mr. K.J. Baby, a writer-activist and winner of the 1994 Kerala Sahitya Akademi award for his novel *Mavelimantram* (Ideal Habitat), recognized the fact that the mountain tribal people in India had their own culture and lifestyle that is different from the fast developing society outside. They were not motivated to education, fallouts in schools, and not able to compete with the children of the educated society. These tribes were marginalized and their culture was near to extinction. His experience with these people and their cultural beauty urged him to make effort to protect their culture and to empower their children. He had no other way, that he spent all his wealth, health and family to this cause. He converted his six acres of land to a commune for the children naming it as ‘Kanavu’, which translated means ‘dream’. Kanavu is the vision of K J Baby, and run by Baby and his wife Shirley, is an innovative experiment in education and living and an attempt to re-create the ideal society envisioned in his novel.

‘Kanavu’ is now their home, school and playground. Here the child's identity and sense of belonging within a tribal community is valued. So too is the traditional wisdom handed down through the generations. The children of Kanavu are natural musicians; they pick up songs and art forms with ease. Indeed, the Kanavu troupe travels all over Kerala singing songs composed and set to music by the children themselves. The songs are lyrical tales about their lives, their loves, their pain and their laughter. In fact, tribal languages and folklore have found new life through Baby's efforts.

This was an experimental endeavor with a few children in the beginning. Negative criticism poured from all around. However, it became a surprising success that now there are

more than 100 children without any sense of incongruity and excels in studies, art and music. The success of this innovative man's determination to make a primitive society to evolve in a sustainable way now attracts many and affirms the role of individuals for a sustainable evolution of our society as a whole. The children of Kanavu gives me courage and encouragement to write this essay; an expression of my gratitude for the wonderful times that I had with them singing and dancing together.

Conclusion

"We are, at this very moment, passing through a change of age. Beneath a change of age lies a change of thought", wrote Teilhard De Chardin[1961, p. 214]. Today we need, not only a 'change of thought' but also 'necessary action of the willing' to make the earth a sustainable living place. Otherwise humanity is closing to a suicide by way of its own technology. My question is, do we recognize an ultimate target of a society with population, resources and environment in a broad balance? And can we cope with the problems raised by the unsustainable society? The answer is not yet. At one hand social and economic development makes us attain more 'freedom' as Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen would suggest. Science and technology brings more and more productivity and convenience. On the other hand it brings greater challenge life systems. Improper development will destroy natural balance. In the recently concluded "World Summit on Sustainable Development"(Aug.27-Sept.4), at Johannesburg, Steve Sawyer, Green peace Climate Policy Director pointed out that "The Plan of Action is not much of a plan, and it contains almost no action. We've spent the last year and half doing damage control. We now have to move forward with a 'coalition of the willing,' those countries, communities, organizations, and people who want to deliver a sustainable energy future." (Green peace press release; September 3). This could be an alternative. It will be redundant to say that there were, there are and there will be many who stand for it. But "The snail is moving forward, but painfully slowly." With this image a scientific advisor to the German government summed up the agreements on sustainable development at the Johannesburg Summit(2002).

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