

2016 Virtual Dialogue on Harmony with Nature – Theme Earth Jurisprudence

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1. What would the practice of Philosophy/Ethics look like from an Earth Jurisprudence perspective? How is that different from the way that Philosophy/Ethics is generally practiced now? And, what are the benefits of practicing Philosophy/Ethics from an Earth Jurisprudence perspective?

The United Nations resolution to promote Earth Jurisprudence, which entails an “Earth- centered” worldview, requires revising the prevailing human-centered way of thinking. How do we change a whole worldview? How do we *de-center* the prevailing way of thinking and then *re-center* it? We must first get people to ask questions about the current worldview (which more or less entails getting people to see the way they see, think about the way they think), including the principles and mechanisms that structure anthropocentrism, key elements of that system, and the primary methods operative within it. Along with this critical inquiry and at the same time, we must actively imagine the alternative Earth-centered worldview, with its own principles, mechanisms, elements, and methods. Critical thinking, methodological self-reflection, and imagination must be brought together to inform a kind of Philosophy that can participate effectively in worldview revision.

To think about the ways in which Philosophy might contribute to the rethinking of a worldview and the move toward Earth Jurisprudence, I propose exploring a kind of thinking organized around the relations between worldview and world that I call “Relevance.” F.C.S. Schiller wrote that relevance is not to be conceived “as a quality residing in the thing thought of *per se*, but *lies in its value for us and in our attitude towards it.*” No field—not Philosophy nor Economics nor Biology nor Literature—is inherently relevant because nothing is inherently relevant; relevance arises from the relation between an object and a subject. Because I approach Philosophy through literary study, relevance for me involves connecting Literature (a product of, as well as a means of reflecting on, “worldview”) with Life (the “world” and its place in the cosmos, the Earth with all its forms of life and processes of living). Literature, in this approach, is not so much written works of a particular quality or possessing particular attributes; it is rather an “attitude,” a way of thinking that enables the pursuit of relevance via reflection and connection.

Making Philosophy relevant involves connecting the discipline to the world in which it arises and to which it belongs, bringing an attitude and way of thinking to bear on the task of worldview revision. More specifically, making Philosophy relevant requires three necessary intellectual steps: 1) putting Philosophy in relation to other disciplines and forms of inquiry; 2) recognizing the integral role that Philosophy can play in understanding, assessing, and revising the prevailing worldview; and 3) philosophically accessing and activating the renewable resources of the Humanities in order to imagine a new view of the world, with Earth and life on Earth at its center.

2. What promising approaches do you recommend for achieving implementation of an Earth- centered worldview for Philosophy/Ethics? (Note: depending on the discipline, approaches could also be theoretical, although practical approaches should be prioritized).

In the essay “Circles,” Ralph Waldo Emerson defines literature as “a point outside of our hodiernal circle through which a new one may be described.” Our “hodiernal circle” is the way we think about our world and go about our business in that world—the world as we view it today, a version of the world we create and recreate daily by virtue of our cultural practices. Although

there are many kinds of writing, “literature,” for Emerson, is by nature a kind of writing that comes to us *as if from another place*: a place outside of our day-to-day experience, our received knowledge of the world we inhabit, and our habitual means of viewing that world. Because it comes from beyond the hodiernal circle, Literature can, if approached with an open mind, apprise us of the circle we occupy. Once we become aware that we are in such a circle—that we have a particular worldview and that the world is the way it is in part because of how we view it—we can begin to evaluate the nature of that circle and then possibly revise our views.

Emerson wrote of the inevitability of change or flux in nature, and prompted readers to consider the consequences of that flux on our ability to make sense of the world: “There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees.” Connecting thought with the recognition of nature’s ongoing flux, Emerson proposed that hope originates in one’s capacity for accepting, acknowledging, and affirming the universe’s fluidity and volatility—allowing oneself to be “unsettled.” Near the end of the essay, he proclaimed, “People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.” If we refuse to be unsettled, if we are unwilling to have our worldview challenged and revised, we impose unnecessary limits on the possibility of improving the world. And, he warned, “The only sin is limitation.”

Limiting ourselves to our hodiernal worldview, tying things to a particular meaning within a particular circle of truth, remaining static inside that circle, separating the inside (worldview) from the outside (world, nature, universe), refusing to think again, eschewing other circles—such a way of living is sinful insofar as it disconnects us from life. When approached as something beyond our hodiernal circle, Literature can serve as a method for attaining clarity and a means of effecting change: “The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it.” Attaining a view of “our present life”—this is one of the primary functions of Philosophy. It requires seeing more clearly life itself, or what we usually call “nature,” as well as seeing how humans live within that life, or what we usually call “culture.”

Any given aspect of the Humanities must try to look outside the limits of its circle—to other aspects and disciplines, at least—in order to imagine its connections to the greater world. The main goal of Earth Jurisprudence is to realign “culture” with “nature,” to reconnect our thinking, practices, systems, etc. with nature’s processes. I think of that realigning and reconnecting as aspects of the pursuit of Relevance. We need to ask questions of the circle of our worldview in order to see how it might better fit within the surrounding world. It may be the case, as Emerson suspected, that we can’t even *see* nature—truly see nature—until we learn to look at the world from a revised worldview. There can be no harmony with nature inside a hodiernal circle built on the separation of humans from everything else.

3. What key problems or obstacles do you see as impeding the implementation of an Earth-centered worldview in Philosophy/Ethics?

One obstacle, inherent to anthropocentrism, lies in the distinction drawn between humans and the rest of nature. To address this separation, we might begin by considering shared attributes of life. Henry David Thoreau wrote about “conforming” human practices to nature, a process that involved looking more deeply into natural phenomena. In his essay “A Winter Walk,” Thoreau observed that “There is a slumbering subterranean fire in nature which never goes out, and which no cold can chill.” This fire within nature, ever burning, is that which is in all living things. It is life itself, the being-alive of all living organisms as well as the ongoing life principle, the great, universal, eternal flame that feeds the little temporary fires of each and every creature. Later in the essay, Thoreau reminds readers that “This subterranean fire has its altar in each man’s breast...” Even though we tend to forget this common element, the fire connects us, burning

inside me as well as my dog, relating us, as we walk in the morning, to the wisteria blossoms suspended from the entwining vine along the path, the pine tree boughs about which the vine twists, the robin stirring in the underbrush, the worms and caterpillars edging along the path, the young woman walking the path swiftly to work—all the forms of living that life on Earth assumes.

Reckoning the interior fire shared by all living things must become part of all branches of the Humanities; otherwise the “anthro-” will stay fixed in the middle of a faulty worldview. The fire need not be the only thing we investigate in our respective fields but we must allow for consideration of human relations to other lifeforms in our studies and interpretations. Part of my point in using Emerson and Thoreau in this dialogue is to demonstrate that even investigating something like 19th-century U.S. authors can participate in the revision of an anthropocentric worldview. Relevance has to come first.

Another obstacle regards our attitude toward change: as Emerson observed, “people wish to be settled.” In many instances, we have difficulty allowing ourselves to be unsettled—that is, accepting change and acknowledging flux. To communicate with others regarding relevance and to address attitudes toward change, we must persistently explore new modes of expression. This work requires helping others to begin to see the limits of anthropocentrism and to feel the fire within all living organisms. Thoreau referred to such utterances as “extreme statements” in his essay “Walking,” and in *Walden* called them “extravagant” expressions, tapping into the ancient roots of these words. “Extravagant” carries the “sense of straying beyond limits”—say, moving beyond the hodiernal circle. Similarly, an “extreme” pushes the limits, exploring the farthest, the outermost edges of our circle.

Another writer, commenting on Thoreau’s extreme statements over a century after their publication, argued that such words become increasingly significant with each passing day, for they draw our attention to “the right of every man, every woman, every child, every dog, every tree, every snail darter, every lousewort, every living thing, to live its own life in its own way at its own pace in its own square mile of home” (E. Abbey). Recognizing the right of every living thing “to live its own life” is another way of acknowledging the fire, another way of saying “Earth Jurisprudence.” It is an expression that moves toward an Earth-centered worldview, and philosophers must seek the most effective ways of uttering it.

4. What are the top recommendations for priority, near-term action to move Philosophy/Ethics toward an Earth Jurisprudence approach? What are the specific, longer-term priorities for action? (Note: give 3 to 10 priorities for action).

- Philosophy must lead the way towards an Earth-centered worldview through critical reflection on the prevailing anthropocentric worldview, revision of that worldview’s principles, and imagining a new worldview.
- As a discipline concerned with the very nature of “worldviews,” Philosophy should assist other disciplines in revising their own questions and practices according to Earth Jurisprudence principles. As Walt Whitman observed, “Laws of the earth and air! if I realize you I have satisfaction.” “Realizing” Earth Jurisprudence requires thoughtful reflection on nature and our place within it.
- As Thoreau suggested, Philosophy must strive for (and guide others in) “Being Present”: “Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present. He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past. Unless our philosophy hears the cock crow in every barn-yard within our horizon, it is belated. That sound commonly reminds us that we are growing rusty and antique in our employments and habits of thought.” Being present—

living mindfully—is one of the most effective ways of beginning to realize the “laws of earth and air,” i.e. Earth Jurisprudence.

- Philosophy must learn to think Earth Jurisprudence in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the night. Philosophy must practice helping others to preface their actions with informed reflection on Earth Jurisprudence at the start of each semester, and perhaps at the start of each lecture, each discussion, and each assignment; or at the start of each session, and perhaps before each meeting, each conference, each call; or at the start of each season of work, and perhaps each shift, each errand, each task, each stint; at the start of each tour, and perhaps each excursion, each recess, each respite.

As early and as often as possible, we must consider and reconsider what it means to be present, to realize, obey, and honor the “laws of earth and air.”

- It is necessary for Philosophy to go beyond the discipline and connect with others in a Transdisciplinary approach to revising an anthropocentric worldview. Philosophy must take part in broader inquiries and discussions, with a host of other disciplines, in pursuit of what will be relevant to an Earth-centered worldview. These inquiries and discussions will enable Philosophy to revise its questions and practices according to Earth Jurisprudence principles.
- Philosophy must explore new methods of expression that foster Earth-centered thinking. Philosophy should work with other disciplines to create effective forms of expression capable of describing a new worldview—that is, identifying, creating, drawing up, giving definition to, learning to inhabit a new circle of vision.