

⁷⁷ George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 350.

⁷⁸ See John Shotter, "In Conversation: Joint Action, Shared Intentionality, and Ethics", in *Theory and Psychology* 5 (1994), pp. 49–73.

IS ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS A COLLECTIVE EGOISM OF MANKIND?

Philosophical Investigation on the Difference between Self-Conservation and Self-Preservation

1. EGOISTIC STRUCTURES INSTEAD OF MORALITY? LOVELOCK AND DAWKINS

Everyone knows that mankind has to reduce the effects of civilization on nature. But the discussion about ecology is not being held by those in the cold and rational disciplines that assess technology or social mores. The main tone of the discussion is, rather, the *moral* call: peace with nature, solidarity with creation. This moral pathos has received a cold reception by two very famous, contradictory thinkers, whose theses I want to present briefly before I investigate them with philosophical analysis. The theses in question appear in "Gaia" by J. Lovelock¹ and "The Selfish Gene" by R. Dawkins.²

First I would like to present the so-called *Gaia-hypothesis*. Lovelock points out the excellent ability of the biosphere to optimize and adjust the conditions of life for all living beings. Subject and agent of this process is Gaia, the harmony of all species. She, Gaia, has always been able to deal creatively with the emissions and by-products of the species living off of her. A well-known case is the oxygen "poisoning" of the first anaerobic beings. They used up the available carbon dioxide and subsequently poisoned themselves by the production of oxygen. Gaia didn't forbid this early form of pollution, but instead invented a new form of life: aerobic beings (the animals). Their breath recycled the waste of the photosynthesizing beings. Gaia always has preferred variety and viability to homeostasis (where internal stability is maintained), because a diversified ecosystem has more stability than a monogenous one.³ The objective purpose of a particular species, then, is not its self-continuation; rather, its final goal is the entire biosphere.

We have to note that, in Lovelock's logic, Gaia is not the *result* of all life processes but, rather, she is the *mistress* of these processes. This is philosophically rather interesting, because it places mankind under tutelage. Human civilization plays only a minor role in the biospherical economy. Extinction of other species by humans does not influence the major

metabolism. Ecologists waste their time with the preservation of some marginal endangered species instead of observing the world climate.⁴

What is the position of the human species, and species in general, within the logic of the Gaia-hypothesis? Mankind fulfills the function that it has received from Gaia – the function of reflexivity and communication, both of which humans can do best among all other creatures. Mankind is the “nervous system” of and for all nature. From mankind come both new movements in environmental ethics and new possibilities for predicting future developments. Ethics and prediction work for the self-preservation of Gaia. If man does not succeed in his task to be attentive and to react, then Gaia will dispose of him, like an organism disposes of a dysfunctional organ. The single species is disposable. It can justify its existence only as long as it contributes to the whole of nature. The value of a species is its function. Therefore, mankind may preserve itself by means of environmental ethics and technology assessment because, and as long as, these work for the good of all nature. The egoism of Gaia explains the altruism of an ecologically-conscious mankind. But we will have to ask further: what is the purpose of the self-preservation of Gaia?

The second threat to the morality of environmental ethics is posed by *sociobiology*, that is, the attempt to explain the altruism within or among species by the egoism of its components, the genes. The preservation of nature by humans would be one form of it. Dawkin's thesis is a radical version of Darwinistic theories of evolution. In contrast to the group-selection theory, which describes evolution as resulting from competition among species, Dawkins attempts to describe evolution as resulting from competition among individuals. All organisms are merely “survival-machines”, “vessels” or “vehicles” of their inhabitants, the genes. In this way, he tries to explain contradictory behavioral patterns, like the extreme altruism of self-sacrificing soldier-bees or the extreme egoism of the praying mantis, which occasionally eats the head of her husband after mating. Both behaviors are strategies used by the genes, tiny sections on the DNA, to multiply themselves. These sections have the ability and the tendency to build copies of themselves. Those molecules that stabilize and institutionalize their own multiplication in the most effective way will be the ones that oust the other copiers. Each living being has to be seen as an aggregation of tools that serve to preserve certain genes, not the entire DNA. Genes always seek to combine with other genes that will help them to multiply better and faster. Sexuality, for instance, is nothing but a method of gene-blending. Life as such, be it an intraspecific or interspecific fight or symbiosis, consists in the “mating” of

these little complexes in their quest for better and fitter peripheries. Life, then, is a function of the lifeless.⁶ The concept of the self-reproduction of species has to be abandoned because living beings are selfish individuals that act altruistically only if doing so helps them to get their way. Loving your enemy instead of destroying him can be an egoism if you are in a complex system of rivalries where other rivals might profit more from it than you do.

2. CRITIQUE OF LOVELOCK AND DAWKINS BY EXTRAPOLATION THEIR POSITIONS

The consequence of Lovelock's and Dawkins' ideas is the denouncement of each attempt on the part of humans to save nature as a moment of non-human self-preservation, be it in the service of the biosphere or as a function of selfish genes. In both cases the immediate goal of self-preservation (of an individual or a species) is the purpose of carrying out a higher logic. Individuals and species are in competition with each other. Their lives are *self-preservation as self-multiplication*. The higher purpose is without competition; it reproduces itself without adjusting. The life of the higher purpose is *self-preservation as self-continuation*. But we ask, further: what is the purpose of the self-continuation of the biosphere or of the genes? Both models can be drawn *ad absurdum* by drawing them *ad infinitum*. Is it possible that Gaia herself is an organ of an encompassing organism (like the galaxy or the universe)? This thought has been developed extensively and consequently by Schelling in his philosophy of nature (1804), with his concept of a “worldbody”.⁷ The *Weltkörper* is the infinite substance, which cannot be limited or defined from outside. This “thing” breaks up the category of “thingness” because it is *unbedingt*, beyond objectivity. It contains all other categories including itself. This is why the worldbody cannot be thought of as a substance or object alone, but must be thought of as the body of a subject that is beyond this world: the *Geist*.

Back to Lovelock: his model cannot explain why he stopped his instrumentalization of the smaller (species) by the bigger (Gaia) at the level of the biosphere of planet Earth. He might answer “Because Earth is the only living planet”. But liveliness is a metaphysical or an aesthetic category, not a biological or geological one. The natural sciences can never give grounds for the definition of life against the lifeless.⁸

The same applies to Dawkins. He cannot give reasons why he starts with the genes as the subjects of action. Isn't it possible that certain atomic structures or amino acids use the genes in order to re-generate themselves?

Why did Dawkins stop the instrumentalization of the bigger (organisms) by the smaller (genes) at the level of the genes?

This thought has been developed by Leibniz in the section concerning nature (§§ 60–81) of his *Monadology* (1714). There he proposes the infinite divisibility of natural entities into smaller complexes and wholes. All organs can be understood as little organisms.⁹ The reason for the harmony of the thoroughgoing interpenetration of the systems are the *Monaden*, which react to each other because they are equipped with perceptibility.

The references to Schelling and Leibniz show that attempts to describe nature as a hierarchy of purposes (Dawkins: species for the sake of individuals for the sake of the genes; Lovelock: individuals for the sake of the species for the sake of biosphere) can never cease to go on until they reach the smallest *mutatis mutandis* the biggest. Both models lead to a *Grenzbegriff*, a concept at the boundary, which must fulfill at least one of two functions a) it must *reflect* the entire of things, b) it must *generate* the entirety of things. A highest purpose has to be found that can guarantee the functionality of the many lower purposes. This logical design has already become doubtful in many senses since the time of Leibniz.

3. FROM DIVINE PROVIDENCE TO SELF-PRESERVATION

The idea of a pyramid of purpose has the tendency to devalue its components. They become replaceable by their functional equivalent. Their right to exist depends only temporarily on the fulfillment of their function. If dysfunctionality means replacability, functionality means safe existence. Doing justifies being. The danger to be replaced can be avoided in two ways:

a) One can apply this idea back to the highest purpose. If the partial purpose becomes dysfunctional, the highest purpose has failed because it has fallen short of its own standards. What is its use if it is not able to organize harmony among the partial purposes? This would be the purpose of the highest purpose. So one has to believe in a cruel God who wants dysfunctions or in a non-omniscient, weak God who cannot help. Or one abandons the idea of a God and a highest purpose altogether. This is the topic of the treatises on Theodicy or Cosmodicy, which concern the justification of God or of the world.

b) The other possibility to escape the totalitarianism of a highest purpose is to rehabilitate the partial purposes by “re-flecting” (bending back) their purposes. Robert Spaemann calls this the “inversion of teleology”.¹⁰ The single individual, the single species are here described in such a way that they

themselves become their own end. Even the observation of the individual by the scientist or the artist becomes an end in itself that is not merely for the glory of God or for the self-fulfillment of the *Weltgeist*. The end in itself (*Selbstzweck*), according to Kant, can be defined as something that shouldn't be used exclusively as an instrument (a means), but also always as a goal. This is the external perspective. From within, an end in itself is something the action of which consists only in self-preservation.

In the history of philosophy the concept of self-preservation marks the emancipation of the living beings from the self-surrender to – or the hetero-preservation by – a creator who has created the world *ex nihilo* and who keeps his creation in existence (*creatio continua*). If one emphasizes the idea of divine providence too much, one gets embroiled in the arguments of theodicy. A God who has to protect and intervene too much loses the title of an omniscient creator. He becomes like an engineer who must always repair his machine. Here one has to assume the creator's ability to create self-sufficient, self-preserving beings. The Deism of the 18th century reduces God's providence to a “let it be” attitude that leaves the self-protecting, self-reproducing things to themselves.¹¹

4. PROCESS-ORIENTED VERSUS INTENTIONAL CONCEPTS OF PURPOSES

Autonomous self-preservation wants to be more than an internalized teleology; it wants to be freed from any teleology and predetermination. In the course of modernity the inversion of teleology became a non-teleology. A being that is an end in itself doesn't *have* self-preservation as its goal but it *is* the result of an autonomous and automatic process. The objective function of subjective striving can be described as the preservation of what was and what is. Therefore, the word “self-preservation” is misleading. In this context it means the process of stabilization and continuation of a system. The intellectually most challenging articulation of this thought is Niklas Luhmann's philosophy of autopoiesis.¹²

On this model, as long as self-preservation was the unfolding of an interior potential or entelechial capacity it was still following a purpose that was earlier than the being. But autopoietic systems reconstruct their own origin as a partial function of their self-execution. In their own logic it is not ‘I am because I came into existence’ but, rather, ‘I came into existence because I am’. The idea of being created is only a means within this logic to deal with the factual contingency of the system. The partial purposes lose their agent

and their author. They are mere executions of a functional structure that has the ability to discern itself from its environment as a system. The expression of altruism or egoism of genes is only an analogous (actually unscientific) way to speak. According to a process-oriented concept of self-preservation, neither genes nor plants, animals, species or humans can have purposes or ends. Self-preservation is never their intention, but only the result of their actions.

If we apply this concept of a process-oriented "purpose" to the self-preservation of mankind, then it follows that ecology and environmental ethics are themselves behaviors that stem from the social and evolutionary urges of mankind. Every doing is then no longer a deed but, rather, a process that just necessarily happens. There would be no difference between the call upon mankind to preserve its life-conditions from the call upon dogs to chase cats. Both would happen out of nature. Preservation of nature would be a necessary reflex, like the instinctive death struggle of an animal. If this were the case we should stop talking about ethics and trust the reliability of the survival instincts of mankind and its strongest specimens. There are two possibilities: mankind destroys or decimates itself, or mankind manages to organize its survival. Both results would be within the logic of evolution. None of the alternatives could be preferred. So we would have no right to criticize a generation for burning the resources of the Earth in a final, satisfactory firework.

The other interpretation of self-preservation is the concept of an intentional purpose. This idea assumes the ability on the part of all nature to have intentions and to act consciously. (Since modernity it is acceptable to ascribe the ability to intend exclusively to humans.) In this interpretation, self-preservation means a conscious and perceptive (though not necessarily a self-conscious) execution of an end in itself.

5. SELF-CONTINUATION VERSUS SELF-CONSERVATION

What is the positive reason for self-preservation? It can either be the *self* or the *preservation*: either the intention is to preserve a certain self or to preserve the act of preserving. This is a philosophical watershed: the distinction between self-conservation and self-continuation.¹³

Self-Continuation

This concept stands in the tradition of modern rationality. The living being is self-reflective, and has as its minimal duty to continue its existence. The con-

tinuation can be organized only by securing the conditions for further continuation. Care of the environment serves the formal perseverance of the self. Therefore, self-continuation is intransitive: it is not directed towards a material goal, having no internal reasons for a final finish or a final accomplishment. It is ceaselessly infinite. The only motif can be drawn from the remembered fact that its existence originates from earlier continuations. Therefore, the only goal is to preserve the essence, which is reduced to the ability to continue its existence.

A system that bases its self-preservation on formal self-continuation can never provide an argument for why it should be preserved as a whole. If it would ever lose its ability to continue itself it would at the same time lose the right to exist (that is, to continue continuation). Only as long as it is able to execute the continuation does it have the right to do so. To destroy a self-continuing creature does not constitute murder because it is not entitled to be in existence beyond the moment of death. If I stop its self-continuation, I also take the meaning of its life.

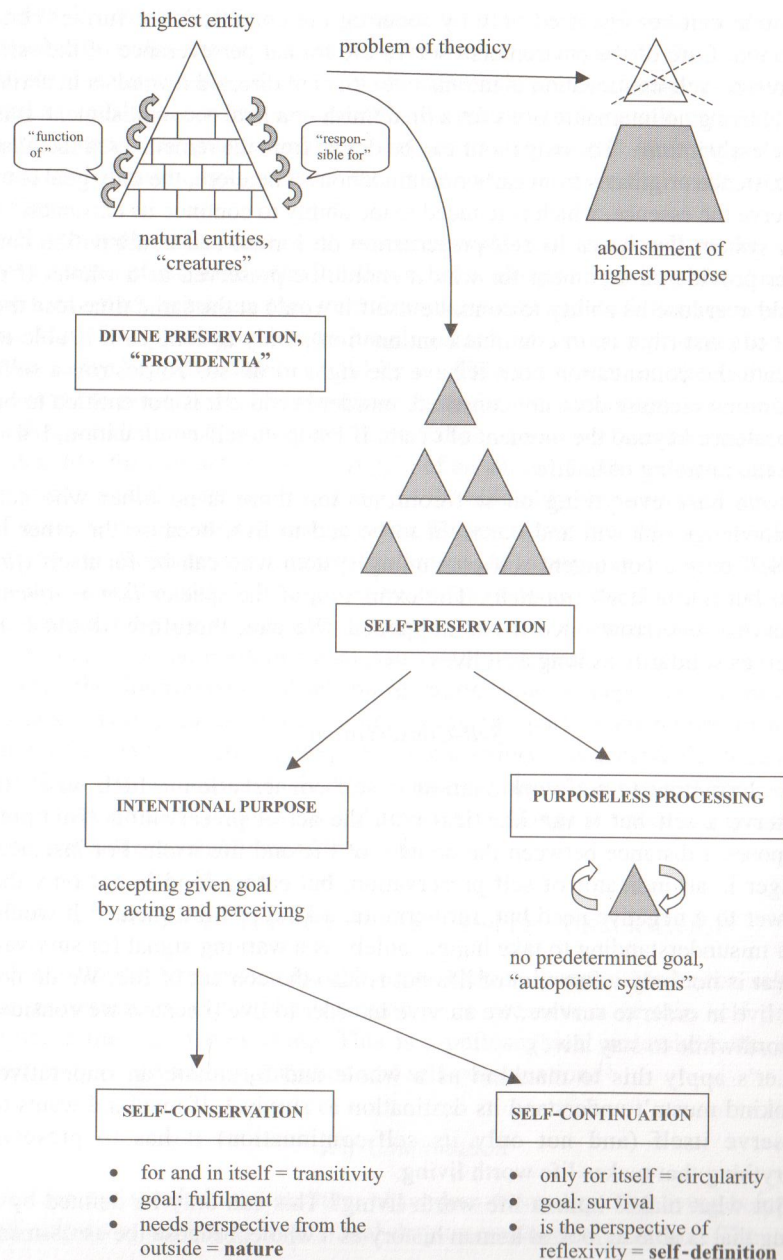
If we base everything on self-continuation there is no other who can acknowledge our will and our right to be and to live, because the other is himself only a contingent self-continuing system who can be for itself (*für sich*) but not in itself (*an sich*). The extinction of the species *homo sapiens* deserves no sorrow once it has happened. We can, therefore, doubt if it deserves solidarity as long as it lives.

Self-Conservation

The alternative to self-continuation is self-conservation, which wants to preserve a self but is not identical with the act of preservation. This presupposes a distance between the content of life and life itself. For instance, hunger is an indicator of self-preservation, but eating food is not only the answer to a negative need but, furthermore, a kind of fulfillment.¹⁴ It would be a misunderstanding to take hunger solely as a warning signal for survival. To eat is not only a function of life but is also the content of life. We do not just live in order to survive; we survive in order to live (because we consider it worthwhile to stay alive).

Let's apply this to mankind as a whole and formulate an imperative: mankind mustn't understand its destination as survival. If mankind wants to preserve itself (and not only its self-continuation) it has to preserve everything that makes life worth living.

But what makes human life worth living? This can only be defined by a being that is able to look at human history as a whole, because the assessment



of a successful life can only be made after the life was accomplished. The judgment of a life can only be made ex externo and ex eventu, i.e. from the outside and after death. Mankind has to wait for the last generation and the person who will make the final evaluation. A single person or generation will never know what the real “self” of humankind is unless it waits for its final state.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, we have to assume criteria that are independent of the values, wishes or definitions of a certain generation. No generation is allowed to make judgments about the essence of future generations.¹⁵ But we cannot wait for the last man, as Nietzsche depicted in his Zarathustra.¹⁶ This means that self-preservation has the intrinsic condition that it acknowledges its dependency on something else other than self definition. The conditions of life (not life itself) are the material that make life worth living and that give us orientation as to what it means to be alive. Living conditions are neither absolute plentitude (paradise, or no difference between grace and life) nor absolute scarcity (desert or no difference between suffering and life).

Mankind has to see for itself that nature as a living condition is preserved in such a way that it can be experienced as normality of life. Nature is the standard that allows us to discern culture and civilization as unnatural. Mankind is the exception of nature, but an exception that knows the rule. Therefore, mankind’s attempts to preserve nature represent not only an evolutionary instinct to organize the survival of one’s own species, but also the obligation to accept one’s own origin. Pure reason knows only itself; it doesn’t know its self. Reason needs a heterogeneous substance that can be its counterpart and not only its projection. Otherwise, it gets circular because it can use itself as a homogeneous means. The difference between knowing a homogeneous means and acknowledging one’s heterogeneous environment is the human characteristic. Mankind needs something beyond the human in order to define its own position. It has to know the rule of which it is the exception. This rule is nature.

NOTES

¹ J. E. Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
² R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

- ³ A predator-prey-chain is more flexible than a scavenger-carrion-chain or organisms that live from anorganic substances. Living beings mutually prepare each others' living conditions. Gaia is, therefore, the mind of mutual enabling, a sort of "global sage".
- ⁴ Twenty years ago, Lovelock was a lonesome prophet for climate-conference when environmental ethics still consisted only of a concern for species and landscapes. The discovery of holes in the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect rehabilitated Lovelock's early warnings.
- ⁵ Cf. Dawkins, *op. cit.*, p. 23 (German translation: Das egoistische Gen).
- ⁶ Cf. also E. O. Wilson, *Biologie als Schicksal. Die soziobiologischen Grundlagen des menschlichen Verhaltens* (Frankfurt v.a.: Ullstein, 1980), p. 10.
- ⁷ The universe ("All") has an organic relationship to its parts. It determines ("affirmiert") each entity in its specific relation to the entirety. Things don't have a relationship with each other; they exist only as relative things within the absolute universe. An entity possesses selfhood ("Selbstsein") insofar as it complies with the organism of the "Weltkörper". It encompasses all realities, including their possibilities ("Potenzen") and is an infinite substance. So the concept of the Weltkörper has no limitation (from outside) and contains itself. The Weltkörper is the objective appearance of an entity that cannot be thought of as an object alone. Its substance must be a subject. This thought entails the concept of "Weltgeist", which Schelling also calls God. Cf. F. W. J. Schelling, *System der gesamten Philosophie und der Naturphilosophie insbesondere*, §§ 239–257 in: ders., *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Bd. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 471–496.
- ⁸ Biology presupposes this definition. As soon as biology tries to explain "life" it must use biochemical reductions, because explanation necessarily means reducing to a less complicated level. Thus, life gets explained by the lifeless.
- ⁹ "Jeder Materieabschnitt kann als ein Garten voll von Pflanzen verstanden werden, und als ein Teich voll Fischen. Aber jeder Zweig der Pflanze, jedes Glied des Tieres, jeder Tropfen seiner Säfte ist ein solcher Garten oder ein solcher Teich". G. W. Leibniz, *Die Prinzipien der Philosophie oder die Monadologie* in: ders., *Philosophische Schriften*, Bd. 1, hg. u. übers. v. H. H. Holz (Darmstadt: Wissen-Schaffliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), pp. 439–483, 471. Nature consists of an infinite sequence of systems that contain systems that contain systems... This concept entails the idea of an order that ensures the compatibility of all systems. Leibniz defined the coordination of this harmony as "Monaden". These monads are not the smallest pieces that build the world, like atoms (nowadays quarks) do. The monads guarantee a consonance with all other monads but rely on a "higher" intelligence that guarantees this consonance as a whole. They are only parts and reflections of the whole, not its initiators. Leibniz solves this problem in the Christian way by assuming a divine Creator who programmed the monads in order to function in stability and harmony ("prästabilierte Harmonie").
- ¹⁰ R. Spaemann, "Bürgerliche Ethik und nichtteleologische Ontologie" in H. Ebeling (ed.), *Subjektivität und Selbsterhaltung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), pp. 76–96, 80.
- ¹¹ And, further, led to the estrangement of universal teleology (the goals of God) from particular teleology (the goals of living beings). Cf. Kant's distinction between the purpose of nature and the purpose of beings in nature.
- ¹² Cf. N. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984).
- ¹³ Cf. H. Blumenberg, "Selbsterhaltung und Beharrung: Zur Konstitution der neuzeitlichen Rationalität" in H. Ebeling (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 144–207, especially pp. 156–158.
- ¹⁴ Cf. E. Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'Extériorité* (La Haye: Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 81–125.

- ¹⁵ Therefore it is immoral to argue that it is permissible to leave toxic waste behind because future generations might change their genetic code in order to develop a resistance to it.
- ¹⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Kritische Studienausgabe*, Bd. 4. Hg. v. G. Colli/M. Montinari (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1967ff.), p. 19. The "last man" knows everything but he cannot re-create mankind. That's what depresses him. He asks, "Was ist Liebe? Was ist Schöpfung? Was ist Sehnsucht? Was ist Stern?", although he has lost any interest in the future.