

NEW TASKS AND OLD THINKING

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The adaptive model of biological evolution - based on the principle of battle for life as a survival condition - and the paradigm of Cartesian rationalism have dominated in Western culture. The pursuit of profit has caused enormous threats to the environment and has led to the catastrophic state of the Earth's biosphere, on a global scale.

Threats to the natural environment are discussed to a greater extent, because they are more evident and tangible than others. Their negative consequences are reflected in the physical health of the population. But, the environment also consists of social and cultural elements. The biological battle for life, as well as the pursuit of commercial profit and the revolution brought about by break-throughs in information technology, have caused the degradation of the socio-cultural environment.

This degradation is reflected in public health, in dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, and in unfavourable changes in personality and psyche. Based on empirical facts, one can state that in the evening of the second millennium, a superposition of the negative consequences of biological and social evolution, and the degradation of the natural, social and cultural environment including the inner environment of man, i.e. his psyche, has taken place. Therefore, it is high time to begin, not only to seriously think about survival, but, also, to act, if we are to survive as mankind.

Technological and economic progress have, thus far, been based on the philosophy and ethics of individualism and egoism. Within this framework, the interests of an individual or of a small social group, both of which exist in very limited space and time, became the most important ones. Therefore, "old thinking" has been of a short-term, or near-sighted and provincial character, and the actions of people have been evaluated in reference to local and immediate success. So, an inimical attitude toward the environment and an economy based on wasteful exploitation of natural and socio-cultural resources, have been accompanying this "old thinking." The most important features of "old thinking" are: the inimical attitude toward others, social conflicts, antagonistic interpersonal relationships, and negligence.

In view of this catastrophic situation, which constitutes a real menace to the existence of humankind, new tasks have appeared, previously unknown, which concentrate upon one purpose: to assure the possibility of long-term survival on Earth. These tasks break the barrier of individualism, as well as of spatial and temporal constraints. They require a new world vision, a new mentality and other ways of thinking and behaving. The realisation of these tasks ought to be based on prospective thinking, i.e. on environmental thinking.

One of the essential features of environmental thinking is to view the world as an isomorphic system, where man is only one of many elements and not more important than the others. For this reason, environmental thinking concerns not only humanity itself, but the whole geo-biosphere. Our life depends on the geo-biosphere, as a whole, and we are responsible for it and, consequently, for our own existence. Humanity is, of course, the starting point of environmental thinking, because our fate and survival are the most important questions. Therefore, environmental thinking, "new thinking," serves our interests. But, in order to serve our interests, it must be oriented towards the environment, in a long-term manner. Our existence depends on our consciousness, as well as on the geo-biosphere, and vice versa. The possibilities to react increase in proportion to technological development. In a feedback situation between man and the biosphere, any opposition, as well as human supremacy over the environment, are out of the question. In view of the necessity for all species of living beings to coexist, compromise and tolerance, rather than contradiction and antagonism, must prevail. This concerns the relationship between man and other species, as well as the relationship between man and inanimate nature. For these relationships to be harmonious, the social environment, i.e. the whole sociosphere, should also be included. Therefore, interpersonal and social relationships ought to be harmonious, tolerant and balanced.

Environmental thinking ought to assure optimal conditions for the existence and survival of future generations. Therefore, it ought to be oriented toward a future which can be foreseen, contrived and planned. Environmental thinking is of prospective nature. The orientation toward the future is an additional feature of new thinking.

Generally, in the biosphere, we have to deal with a synergy of many factors and with structural determinism. Therefore, the set-back of the linear extrapolation of future states, based on present ones, is also a characteristic of environmental thinking.

Environmental thinking breaks with anthropocentrism and egoism. Although environmental thinking is a human feature and serves human interests, it must, first of all, serve the fundamental interest of assuring our existence and survival. Human interests and goals cannot violate the balance of the biosphere and the sociosphere. On the contrary, they ought to be consonant with the goals and interests of other living beings and with the rules of the world evolution. For this reason, environmental thinking seems to be cosmocentric. But that is not true. Man as an integral component of the nature-society system ought to be regarded as an important object of scientific research and philosophical reflection.

The pollution of the Danube is a tangible effect of the old way of thinking. The economic policy of each Danube State has been without respect for the interests of neighbouring States. Each State has treated its segment of the river as its own, exclusive property and has exploited it in an impromptu and wasteful way. But it recently became obvious that pollution and various hydroconstruction projects are endangering the existence of many species living in the river or near it, as well as the survival of the people themselves. The feeling of common danger, in the form of an ecological catastrophe, has sensitised people living in the Danube area to the necessity of entertaining preventive actions. Different environmental movements constrain Statesmen to adequate action. From environmental consciousness and philosophical reflection, one proceeds to political action, even on a world-wide level. As an example, one can mention the Global Ecological Plan, put forward by the Vice-President of the United States of America, Mr. Al Gore. This conference also seems to be proof of the pressure exerted by environmentalists and environmental philosophers on politicians.

The catastrophic vision of an environmental "Apocalypse" sets an important task for humanity: to stop environmental degradation processes and, as far as possible, to restore the natural environment to its former state - what seems to be rather a Utopia - in order to increase the survival possibilities of the present and future generations. An additional task would be to stop the destructive processes which occur in the socio-cultural environment, in order to prevent the "dehumanisation" of humankind. These two tasks seem to be different, but one cannot be realised without the other. In my opinion, the improvement of the socio-cultural environment is a necessary condition for the improvement of the natural environment. The improvement of the socio-cultural environment has zero chance of success, if the way of thinking and the world vision follows the paradigm of Cartesian rationalism and scientism. This should be replaced by the paradigm of environmentalism, which will reduce extreme rationalism and put environmental rationality to effect.

We live in a time of curious contradiction between new tasks and proof for solving them on the grounds of an anachronistic way of thinking. The construction of a new social order based on the idea of bio-anthropocentrism and the termination of environmental destruction need a world outlook and a way of thinking that will be compatible with the ideas generated by environmentalism. As a result, prevalent paradigms, such as Cartesian rationalism, scientism, the ideology of consumerism and the pursuit of profit should be abandoned. In the event that it is impossible to completely eliminate them, they ought to at least be restrained, through the application of the principles of environmental thinking and "adequate humanism." This could allow the quelling of the above-mentioned contradiction.

New ways of thinking cannot be limited by the interests of particular social groups nor by rationalistic rigour. Solving general problems and global tasks, as, for instance, the environmental problems of the Danube countries and the restoration of the river, requires the relinquishment of provincial attitudes and particular points of view.

In reference to the topic of this conference, i.e. resolving controversies on how to make the Danube more productive, and how to improve its state and that of the areas around it - and such a controversy exists between the Slovak Republic and Hungary in the case of the Gabčíkovo waterworks - it would be possible to achieve success, if all the Danube countries fully respected the principles of harmonious coexistence, cooperation and tolerance. Instead of aggravating existing contradictions and antagonisms, or generating new ones on the grounds of old thinking, we ought to search for possibilities to compromise, in the name of the common good. The welfare of not just one, but of all ten countries should be taken into account, on the grounds of the new way of thinking, based on environmental principles. As long as decision-makers and the government elite do not radically reorient their consciousness and become aware of the fact that humanity cannot be disassociated from the natural environment, their efforts to restore the Danube area will have no desirable effects.

To be solved, each task needs adequate technological and conceptual means. Solutions to environmental problems require good comprehension of the problem, and well defined ideas and ways of thinking. New tasks need new ideas and a new way of thinking, as well as the elimination of paradigms that constrain our mental horizons. These limitations have to be overcome, otherwise the new tasks connected with the prevention of a global environmental catastrophe - a prerequisite for the future existence of humankind - will remain unsolved. The most important current task involves a quick and effective awareness of the problem and the transition from an anachronistic way of thinking to a modern one. And this is not a task for philosophers, but one in fact for educators.

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