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Human ecology

Introduction

Several years ago UNESCO published a document presenting fields of knowledge that will be necessary in future education rendered to societies.¹ The document comprises seven chapters, which, among others, deal with the problems pertaining to shaping of group identity of the entire humanity, threats and hopes along the way toward development of the human species, sense of human existence put into individual and social perspectives, and concludes by calling for new ethics that would embrace changes to world order that the present world is currently facing. In this epoch it is human that is the single highest good (*summum bonum*), and all other values will gain their significance based on their scope of relations with the man.

This work's guiding principle is the concern over the future of human species, which, according to its author is threatened not so much by degradation of nature, as by degradation of social environment. Upon reading that paper one can conclude that men cease to control their artifacts, especially those of science and technology; they are no longer capable of accomplishing their goals in a simple, direct manner. More and more commonly people feel lost and alienated from reality in they live in. It is as if we were to learn anew how to handle everyday life's situations. At the same time, as Morin declares, it is the humanity that is our planet's destiny, and it is hard to imagine Earth devoid of our presence anymore. Caring for ourselves also means caring for the future of the entire planet. The bonds of man with the environment have already been greatly weakened. Even though globalization has witnessed an extremely dynamic development, and already commenced a planetary era, it is not to be forgotten that the 20th century has left behind heritage of death, so difficult to remove, consisting in stockpiled nuclear weapons, polluted environment, and the threat of degradation to

¹ Edgar MORIN, *Les sept savoirs nécessaires à l'éducation du futur*, Paris: UNESCO 1999.

numerous societies. The time has come for us to take care of our future. Excessive interest in the surroundings supercedes natural care for our own prosperity. The vision of the future required by the coming planetary era must be acceptable to all human communities, including those currently in conflict. Paradoxically, the threats that through their universal nature concern each and everyone may constitute a basis to formulate an optimistic vision of global community.

Undoubtedly ecological hazards do meet such a condition: they do not respect borders nor any other limits defined by men. However majority of hazards prevailing within cultural and natural environments relate exclusively to our species. Exposing only those hazards that originate from the environment which is external to men (biosphere), and simultaneously disregarding the environment which is inherent to our species (anthroposphere, otherwise known as sociosphere) gives rise to anxiety. An awareness of there being no such approach gave grounds for new scientific field combining anthropology, philosophy and traditional ecology, which The Chicago School of Sociology defined as human ecology.

The need to foster such science was raised by John Paul II who recognized two forms of ecology: “natural ecology” and “human ecology.” The great advantage that natural ecology has over human ecology the Pope perceives as a threat to natural order that is in opposition to priorities defined by the Church’s social doctrine. Too much focus is currently applied to environmental hazards at the expense of fighting the hazards of social life. In his encyclical *Centesimus annus* John Paul II notes: „too little effort is made to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic “human ecology”. Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given to him, but man too God’s gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed.”²

How can then human condition be improved? Edgar Morin, quoted above, is correct in claiming that hazards can only be eliminated by men. But first social structures need to be changed, mental boundaries, stereotypes and prejudices need to be removed.³ To achieve this goal a new planetary ethics needs to be developed. This concerns both the ethics of relationships between the people, ethics of individuals, as well as biological determinants of human behavior. In other words new ethics should accept the rules established in nature. Any interference occurring there originates to a certain degree from sources different than natural, and is caused by artificial intermediary elements (artifacts), which,

² JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Centesimus annus*, 38, Vatican 1991.

³ See MORIN, *Ibid.*, Chapitre VII, *L'éthique du genre humain*.

against their authors will, have begun living their own life. Now, approaching our own works in separation from ourselves is a complete nonsense. Hence only the man that treats himself as a fellow-citizen of the world in which he lives, both socially and biologically, is capable of making the vision of planetary community become real.

It is noticeable that the importance of ecological problems in our life has over decades been constantly growing. A thirty-year-old tradition of the Earth Day greatly contributes to this approach. Undoubtedly, pro-environmental attitudes are commonly accepted virtually in all societies. In early eighties an opinion that 'an average citizen' has influence on the condition of environment was shared but by a small group of respondents. Nowadays 51% of Poles express such an opinion. On the other hand we think that the environmental pollution is the greatest of hazards that development of civilization brings. Public Opinion Research Center that conducted a survey on environmental awareness among Poles, in their report, explicitly underline that Poles have become more sensitive to ecological problems relating to the their nearest natural surroundings⁴.

Given the context of the survey results it is difficult to explain a certain fatigue that societies show with regard to the acts of environmentalists. One can realize that the importance of ecological problems is diminished by the Green themselves who exaggeratedly act to protect the environment. This social fatigue can help understand why environmental protection issues arouse far lower interest in the USA than those of education, welfare, crime, family problems and economy. Environmental protection takes more or less the same place as weapons control and tax policy. No doubt, when watching lack of integrity among environmental organizations and their "disability to create" one can conclude that it may also affect Polish organizations soon.

From time to time an opinion is offered whereby interests of environmental protection will not align with the interests of humanity. This belief however is lacking rationale. Other concepts advising man to give up his own interests to the benefit of other live creatures, or even selected elements of inanimate nature deserve no support either. This does not seem to be necessary though. People do not need to fight for their place in the niche. The nature is so much subordinate to man that in numerous cases return to nature's original state is no longer possible. We should stop developing imaginary pro-environmental theories, because their failure may weaken the drive toward environmental protection. What must be developed instead is a new ecology with man being number one character:

⁴ See. BOGNA Wciórka, *Jak chronimy nasze środowisko naturalne*, „Komunikat CBOS” nr 2200 z 30.09. 1999 [How We Protect Our Environment, Announcement No. 2200 of 30 Sep. 1999, Warsaw: Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej [Public Opinion Research Center] 1999.

a focal point of study, its creator and executor of its assumptions. Human ecology should not seek for giving up what men have achieved. It should rather focus on better management of available resources. In this respect human ecology does not generate any new boundaries nor new conflicts.

What should be the characteristics of ecology thus understood? It seems that postulates of the Ministry of National Education regarding the general education for children and youth provides an answer. The general education should at least equip the students with information and skills enabling them to act within four areas that can well be recognized as the grounds of human ecology concept. They are⁵:

1. Seek harmony and external balance (live in agreement with yourself),
2. Coexist within the environment of our planet (as opposed to currently dominating attitude of wasteful exploitation of natural resources),
3. Coexist and be effective acting within various groups and communities on micro and macrosocial scale (within family, at workstation, within community)
4. Make use of our civilization's information resources (unhampered access to required information).

Human ecology in its scope of interest goes far beyond nature. Narrowing it down merely to the area of current and future hazards is unacceptable. Before we define the direction in which the human ecology education should develop we should focus on defining what specifically we want to teach as well as what area we want to cover. How should then the notion of "human ecology" be understood? The easiest solution would be to adopt the definition that the literature provides on the subject, i.e. to acknowledge that "human ecology" is one of the aspects of general ecology and it deals with relationships between man as a species and the surrounding environment.⁶ It can then be defined as a sub-discipline of ecology dealing with "the entire human species and its extraordinarily complex relationship with other organic and inorganic components of the world." Human ecology further divides into: cultural ecology, which "is the study of the way the culture of a human group is adapted to the natural resources of the environment, and to the existence of other human groups"; and social ecology that studies

⁵ Stefan KOZŁOWSKI, *Droga do ekorozwoju* [A Way Toward Ecodevelopment], Warsaw: PWN 1994, p. 187.

⁶ This type of approach was presented by Bernard Campbell in his book *Human Ecology*, 2nd ed., New York 1995. Campbell's approach has also numerous followers in Poland e.g. Andrzej Malinowski, *Wstęp do antropologii i ekologii człowieka* [Introduction to Human Anthropology and Ecology], Łódź: Wydawnictwo UŁ 1994; Jan STRZAŁKO, Janusz OSTOJA-ZAGÓRSKI, *Ekologia populacji ludzkich. Środowisko człowieka w pradziejach* [Ecology of Human Populations. Human Environment in Primeval History], Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM 1995 or *Czynniki rozwoju człowieka. Wstęp do ekologii człowieka* [Factors of Human Development. Introduction to Human Ecology], edited by Napoleon Wolański, Warsaw: PWN 1981.

„the way the social structure of a human group is a product of the group's total environment.”⁷

How can human ecology be cultivated?

Human ecology studies at European schools of higher education are usually saturated with natural sciences, in particular with that of biology, geography, chemistry and physics⁸. Humanistic merits are scarce. Especially apparent is the lack of philosophy and ethics, which seem to be inseparable from the entire existence and activity of mankind.⁹ Two different standpoints as to the subject of human ecology have developed, followed by two ways in which the scientific studies on the subject are approached. One of the approaches discerns no difference between the man and other parts of nature. What is characteristic is that the stress is put here on the word 'ecology.' Human ecology thus understood does not in consequence much differ from ecology of animals. Representatives of this approach frequently assign features, so far only pertaining to men, to other organisms. This specifically applies to feelings and capability of abstract thinking.

The other approach is by far more developed. Its scope embraces virtually all areas in which mankind functions. The main stress is put here on the word 'human' – consequently it is firmly established within humanistic tradition. Representatives of this approach do not diminish the value of any organism. However they do perceive man as a quality distinct from other parts of nature, mainly due to man's capabilities. This approach specifically requires philosophy and ethics to play an important role.

Which approach to take depends on a decision whether human ecology is supposed to improve our life's conditions, keep them at an unchanged level, or, eventually, limit ourselves and our activity.

Given the versatile perspectives one could dare present a vision of human ecology, which would combine philosophical research along with natural sciences. Such studies should especially cover:

1. Religious and philosophical considerations on human phenomenon, the sense of human life and the future. Within its scope there are inquiries into what we call human nature, dignity and spirituality. Undoubtedly, it can be

⁷ Campbell, *ibid.* p. 7.

⁸ Same as at Australian National University where human ecology has been included as part of geography. See Australian National University website (Geography and Human Ecology): anu.edu.au.

⁹ At University of Southampton, UK no philosophers nor ethicists were involved in establishing its Centre for Human Ecology & Environment. It was formed by medical students, engineers, statisticians and archeologists.

further enriched by the studies on the variability of concept of man in the history of philosophy.

2. Human environment. Environmentally driven conditions of human life and health. Man as a consumer. Processes consisting in the exchange between man and environment. Variability of the environment in the history. Man's impact on environment;
3. Creative role of man in shaping himself and his world. Culture and society as habitats created by and for men. Religion, arts, philosophy, science and work as factors determining human awareness. Predominant position of man in the world of nature;
4. Man as subject of scientific studies. Humanities and natural sciences dealing with man, human past, present and the future;
5. Family as a natural habitat of man. Physical and spiritual development of man within the family.

The standpoint presented above is but one of many that can be formulated on the subject. What seems to be of greatest significance is that it is possible to combine various scientific fields within the framework of one subject of study. Human ecology can therefore serve as a bridge between natural sciences and humanities. This way of approaching the subject matter is also delineated by Jürgen Moltman who views human history as synchronized with „earth ecosystem's natural time". Like a visionary he states „Today's future is oriented to synchronizing historical time with the rhythms of natural time – i.e. the rhythms of earth's ecosystem and biorhythms of human body. Either human history and nature's history reach a coordinated harmony, or the human history shall come to its irreversible end in ecological death"¹⁰. In this context science and technology must not be viewed as separate from human capacity. They are there to supplement man, and can in no way be viewed as stand-alone values. This is a warning, but also a moral requirement. It is then justifiable to state that regardless of the standpoint that representatives of different fields of science take, the future of our species greatly depends on interdisciplinary approach to the questions that constitute subject of study of human ecology.

ABSTRACT

Environmental problems do have universal dimension: they concern entire humanity as well as each human being individually. Therefore, a new ecology needs to be developed in which man will play a principal role being a focal point of study, its creator and executor of its assumptions. The discipline thus understood is one of aspects of general ecology for

¹⁰ Jürgen MOLTSMANN, *Bóg w stworzeniu* [God in Creation], translation by Zbigniew Danielewicz, Kraków: ZNAK 1995, pp. 228-229.

it studies relationships between man as a species and its environment. The author believes that, regardless of the standpoint that representatives of various sciences may take, the future of our species depends on interdisciplinary approach toward the questions that are subject to human ecology studies.

Key words: anthroposphere (socosphere), biosphere, human, ecology, human ecology, Earth.

Ekologia człowieka

STRESZCZENIE

Problemy ekologiczne mają wymiar uniwersalny, dotyczą bowiem zarazem całej ludzkości oraz każdego człowieka z osobna. Istnieje więc potrzeba utworzenia nowej ekologii z człowiekiem w roli głównej – zarazem jako głównym przedmiotem jej zainteresowania, twórcą i wykonawcą jej założeń. Tak rozumiana dyscyplina jest jednym z aspektów ekologii ogólnej, gdyż zajmuje się relacjami pomiędzy człowiekiem jako gatunkiem, a otaczającym go środowiskiem. Autor zauważa, iż niezależnie od stanowiska, jakie zajmują poszczególni przedstawiciele nauk, że przyszłość naszego gatunku zależy właśnie od interdyscyplinarnego rozwiązania problemów, które sygnalizuje ekologia człowieka.

Słowa kluczowe: antroposfera (socjosfera), biosfera, człowiek, ekologia, ekologia człowieka, Ziemia.