

Wolfgang Welsch

From the modernist anthropic mindset to a future evolutionist mindset

Roundtable "Philosophy after Fukushima"
XXIII World Congress of Philosophy (Athens, August 2013)

In Japan, "Fukushima" is the name of a disaster. In Europe and worldwide, "Fukushima" has become the synonym for a due change. This change concerns more than just our understanding and use of technology. On a deeper level, it is about a transition from the anthropic mindset of modernity to a future evolutionist mindset.

Modernity's orientation was deeply anthropic. Diderot coined its protoypic formula in 1755: "Man is the unique concept from which one must start and to which one must refer everything back." After Kant had accredited this axiom with a perfect epistemological justification, the anthropic mindset dominated modernity until our day. According to it, everything is to be designed from the human point of view and to be adapted to human needs. In order to do so, one has to take exclusively human aspects – nothing else – into account. The world is human world. Due to his rationality, man is a strictly autonomous being without any worldly restrictions or obligations. Rationality gives us sovereignty and *carte blanche* towards the world. Modern technology acted out this conception. Fukushima signalled its failure.

The new orientation we need is not just ecological. Just as the technological mastery of nature was only the superficial manifestation of the anthropic principle of modern thought, so the plea for ecological thinking just covers up the requirement of a deeper shift: from anthropic to evolutionist thought.

This mindset will finally take Darwin seriously. Humans are not beings with a supernatural essence but natural beings through and through. Not only our lower but even our highest capacities (cognition, reflection) have developed from animal beginnings. Rationality is widespread in the animal kingdom, and the elementary form of cognition is even coextensive with the existence of life on earth. Humans, in their evolution, drew on a huge stock of prehuman capacities handed down to them through phylogeny. Even our current additional abilities (developed after the transition from natural to cultural evolution about 40,000 years ago) are based on the ongoing reliability of our primary, animal-inherited capacities.

The human cannot be understood – as the anthropic principle of modernity would have it – exclusively in human terms. Rather one has to take his evolutionary provenance and animal heritage into account. Furthermore, this provenance implies that the basic human features of comprehending the world and dealing with it are not just idiosyncratic human constructions but that the world had its part in their formation, so that they bear in themselves positive sanctions by the world. Hence, the human is not an unworldly and autonomous being, but rather one shaped by and connected with the world.

Once we follow this evolutionist perspective, our self-perception and our attitude towards the world will change. We shall no longer behave as the masters of the world (an attitude doomed to failure, as Fukushima has made clear to us) but as fellow players. We shall practise ecology no longer just for the benefit of us humans (the old anthropic remnant in standard ecological thought), but overcome this human-centered perspective. We shall finally get beyond the an-

thropic principle and catch a glimpse of what philosophy has variously called "the reconciled state".