

By Refusing To Recognize That the Earth Is Alive, We Enable the Destruction of Our Planet



The Háifoss waterfall in the heart of Iceland. (Photo: Moyan Brenn/flickr/cc)

By Charles Eisenstein | [Common Dreams](#)

Does the concept of a living planet uplift and inspire you, or is it a disturbing example of woo-woo nonsense that distracts us from practical, science-based policies?

The scientifically-oriented nuts-and-bolts environmental or social activist will roll her eyes upon hearing phrases like “The planet is a living being.” From there it is a short step to sentiments like, “Love will heal the world,” “What we need most is a shift in consciousness,” and “Let’s get in touch with our indigenous soul.”

What’s wrong with such ideas? The skeptics make a potent

argument. Not only are these ideas delusional, they say, but to voice them is a strategic error that opens environmentalism to accusations of flakiness. By invoking unscientific concepts, by prattling on about the 'heart' or spirit or the sacred, we will be dismissed as naive, fuzzy-headed, irrational, hysterical, over-emotional hippies. What we need, they say, is more data, more logic, more numbers, better arguments, and more practical solutions framed in language acceptable to policy-makers and the public.

I think that argument is mistaken. By shying away from the idea of a living planet, we rob environmentalism of its authentic motive force, engender paralysis rather than action, and implicitly endorse the worldview that enables our destruction of the planet.

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The psychology of contempt.

To see that, let's start by observing that the objection to "Earth is alive" isn't primarily a scientific objection. After all, science can easily affirm or deny Earth's aliveness depending on what definition of life is being used. No, we are dealing with an emotional perception here, one that goes beyond 'alive' to affirm that Earth is sentient, conscious, even sacred. That is what upsets the critics. Furthermore, the derisiveness of the criticism, encoded in words like 'hippie' or 'flake,' also shows that more than an intellectual difference of opinion is at stake. Usually, derision comes from insecurity or fear. "Judgment," says Marshall Rosenberg, "is the tragic expression of an unmet need."

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What are they afraid of? (And I—the voice of the derisive

critic lives in me as well.) Could it be that the contempt comes in part from a fear that one is, oneself, 'naive, irrational and over-emotional?' Could the target of the derision be the projection of an insecurity lurking within? Is there a part of ourselves that we disown and project, in distorted form, onto others—an innocent, trusting, childlike part? A feminine part? A vulnerable part?

If so, then critics of the infiltration of New Age ideas into the environmental movement may not be serving the movement at all. They may be enacting their own psychological dramas instead. If you are one of those critics, I am not asking you to join hands with me and sing Kumbaya. I ask only that you soberly and honestly consider where your discomfort comes from.

Certainly, much of the discomfort is a healthy revulsion toward the escapism, spiritual bypass, and cultural appropriation that plague so much of the New Age. Certainly, there is a danger that, intoxicated by the idea of cosmic purpose or some-such, we ignore the pain and grief that we must integrate if we are to act effectively and courageously. Certainly, dogma like "It's all good" or "We're all one" can blind us to the exigency of the planetary crisis and discourage us from making changes in our lives. Certainly, borrowed rituals and concepts of sacredness can be an insidious form of colonialism, a strip-mining of cultural treasure to compensate for and enable the continuation of our own cultural vacuity.

However, such criticisms address a mere caricature of the thoughtful work of generations of philosophers, scientists and spiritual teachers, who have framed sophisticated alternatives to conventional phenomenological, ontological and causal narratives. Phew, that was a mouthful. What I'm saying is not to hide behind facile criticisms.

The fear of being emotional, irrational, hysterical, etc. is

very close to a fear of the inner feminine, and the exclusion of the fuzzy, the ill-defined, and the emotionally-perceived dimensions of our activism in favor of the linear, rational, and evidence-based, mirrors the domination over and marginalization of the feminine from our social choice-making. Part of our resistance to the notion of Earth as a living being could be the patriarchal mind feeling threatened by feminine ways of knowing and choosing. But that's still pretty theoretical, so let me share a little of my own introspection.

When I apprehend concepts such as "Earth is alive," or "All things are sacred," or "The universe and everything in it bears sentience, purpose and life," there is always an emotion involved; in no case is my rejection or acceptance the result of pure ratiocination. Either I embrace them with a feeling of eager, tender hope, or I reject them with a feeling of wariness, along the lines of "It is too good to be true," or "I'm nobody's fool." Sometimes, beyond wariness, I feel a hot flash of anger, as if I had been violated or betrayed. Why?

"I became an environmentalist out of love and pain: love for the world and its beauty and the grief of seeing it destroyed."

That wariness is deeply connected to the contempt I've described. The derision of the cynic comes from a wound of crushed idealism and betrayed hopes. We received it on a cultural level when the Age of Aquarius morphed into the Age of Ronald Reagan, and on an individual level as well when our childish perception of a living, personal universe in which we are destined to grow into magnificent creators gave way to an adulthood of deferred dreams and lowered expectations. Anything that exposes this wound will trigger our protective instincts. One such protection is cynicism, which rejects and derides as foolish, naive or irrational anything that affirms the magic and idealism of youth.

Our perceived worldview has cut us off, often quite brutally,

from intimate connection with the rest of life and with the rest of matter. The child hugs a tree and thinks it feels the hug and imagines the tree is his friend, only to learn that no, I'm sorry, the tree is just a bunch of woody cells with no central nervous system and therefore cannot possibly have the qualities of beingness that humans have.

The child imagines that just as she looks out on the world, the world looks back at her, only to learn that no, I'm sorry, the world consists of a jumble of insensate stuff, a random melee of subatomic particles, and that intelligence and purpose reside in human beings alone. Science (as we have known it) renders us alone in an alien universe. At the same time, it crowns us as its lords and masters, for if sentience and purpose inhere in us alone, there is nothing stopping us from engineering the world as we see fit. There is no desire to listen for, no larger process to participate in, no consciousness to respect.

"The Earth isn't really alive" is part of that ideological cutoff. Isn't that the same cutoff that enables us to despoil the planet?

The wounded child interjects, "But what if it is true? What if the universe really is just as science describes?" What if, as the biologist Jacques Monod put it, we are alone in "an alien world. A world that is deaf to man's music, just as indifferent to his hopes as to his suffering or his crimes." Such is the wail of the separate self. It is loneliness and separation disguised as an empirical question.

While no amount of evidence can prove it false, we must acknowledge that the science that militates against an intelligent, purposeful, living universe is ideologically freighted and culturally bound. Witness the hostility of institutional science to any anomalous data or unorthodox theory that suggest purposiveness or intelligence as a property of inanimate matter.

“What hides behind the contempt? The reactivity?”

Water memory, adaptive mutation, crop circles, morphic fields, psi phenomena, UFOs, plant communication, precognitive dreams...and a living Earth, a living sun, a living universe, all incite scorn. Anyone who believes in these, or even takes them as a valid topic of investigation, risks the usual epithets of ‘pseudo-scientist,’ ‘flake,’ or ‘woo-woo,’ regardless of the merits of the theory or the strength of the evidence.

Of course, simply by making this assertion I open myself to the very same calumny. You can conveniently dismiss me as irrational, scientifically semi-literate, gullible at best and delusional at worst, perhaps knowingly dishonest, bamboozling my audience with learned allusions to impart an illusion of scientific probity to my ravings. But if you really care about this Earth, you’ll want to be curious about the emotional content of this judgment. What hides behind the contempt? The reactivity?

What moves the environmentalist?

Our discomfort with New Age-sounding concepts like “The planet is alive” is not entirely rational, but comes in large part from a wound of betrayal, cloaked in the pervasive ideology of our culture. Is it true though? We might play with various definitions of life and come up with logical, evidence-based arguments pro and con, just as we could debate the veracity of anomalous data and unconventional theories, and never come to an agreement. So let us look at the matter through a strategic lens instead. What belief motivates effective action and real change? And what kind of action results from each belief?

Most people reading this probably consider themselves to be environmentalists; certainly most people think it is important to create a society that leaves a livable planet to future generations. What is it, exactly, that makes us into

environmentalists? If we answer that, we might know how to turn others into environmentalists as well, and to deepen the commitment of those who already identify as such.

I don't know about you, but I didn't become an environmentalist because someone made a rational argument that convinced me that the planet was in danger. I became an environmentalist out of love and pain: love for the world and its beauty and the grief of seeing it destroyed. It was only because I was in touch with these feelings that I had the ears to listen to evidence and reason and the eyes to see what is happening to our world. I believe that this love and this grief are latent in every human being. When they awaken, that person becomes an environmentalist.

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Now, I am not saying that a rational, evidence-based analysis of the situation and possible solutions is unimportant. It's just that it will be compelling only with the animating spirit of reverence for our planet, born of the felt connection to the beauty and pain around us.

Our present economic and industrial systems can only function to the extent that we insulate ourselves from our love and our pain. We insulate ourselves geographically by pushing the worst degradation onto far-away places. We insulate ourselves economically by using money to avoid the immediate consequences of that degradation, pushing it onto the world's poor. We insulate ourselves perceptually by learning not to see or recognize the stress of the land and water around us and by forgetting what healthy forests, healthy streams and healthy skies look like. And we insulate ourselves ideologically by our trust in technological fixes and justifications like, "Well, we need fracking for energy independence, and besides it's not that bad," or "After all, this forest isn't in an ecologically critical area."

The most potent form of ideological insulation though is the belief that the world isn't really in pain, that nothing worse is happening than the manipulation of matter by machines, and that therefore as long as we can engineer some substitute for 'ecosystem services,' there need be no limit to what we do to nature. Absent any inherent purpose or intelligence, the planet is here for us to use.

"When environmentalists cite the potential economic losses from climate change, they implicitly endorse economic gain and loss as a basis for environmental decision-making."

Just today, the borough was removing trees on our street, and I felt grief and rage as I listened to the chainsaws, even as my mind said, "But after all, those are old trees and the branches could fall onto a person or damage a house. They are unsafe. And what does it matter? They are only trees." So here, inhabiting my own mind, was the fundamental ideology of domination (the trees must be removed because they stand in the way of human interests) and separation (they are 'only trees;' they are not-self; they do not have the basic qualities of beingness that I do).

Look around this planet. See the results of that ideology writ large.

The love of life.

The idea that our planet is alive, and further, that every mountain, river, lake and forest is a living being, even a sentient, purposive, sacred being, is therefore not a soppy emotional distraction from the environmental problems at hand; to the contrary, it disposes us to feel more, to care more, and to do more. No longer can we hide from our grief and love behind the ideology that the world is just a pile of stuff to be used instrumentally for our own ends.

True, that ideology is perfectly consistent with cutting carbon emissions, and consistent as well with any

environmental argument that invokes our survival as the primary basis for policymaking. A lot of environmental activism depends on appeals to survival anxiety. "We have to change our ways, or else!" Appealing to fear and selfish interest, in general, is a natural tactic for anyone coming from a belief that the planet has no intrinsic value, no value beyond its utility. What other reason to preserve it is there, when it has no intrinsic value?

It should be no surprise that this tactic has failed. When environmentalists cite the potential economic losses from climate change, they implicitly endorse economic gain and loss as a basis for environmental decision-making. Doubtless they are imagining that they must 'speak the language' of the power elite, who supposedly don't understand anything but money, but this strategy backfires when, as is the norm, financial self-interest and ecological sustainability are opposed.

Similarly, calls to preserve the rainforests because of the value of the medicines that may one day be derived from its species imply that, if only we can invent synthetic alternatives to whatever the forest might bear, we needn't preserve the rainforest after all. Even appealing to the well-being of one's grandchildren harbors a similar trap: if that is your first concern, then what about environmental issues that only affect people in far-away lands, or that don't tangibly harm any human being at all? The clubbing of baby seals, the extinction of the river dolphin, the deafening of whales with sonar... it is hard to construct a compelling argument that any of these threaten the measurable well-being of future generations. Are we then to sacrifice these beings of little utility?

Besides, did anyone ever become a committed environmentalist because of all the money we'll save? Because of all the benefits we'll receive? I am willing to bet that even the survival of the species or the well-being of your grandchildren isn't the real motive for your environmentalism.

You are not an environmentalist because you are afraid of what will happen if you don't act. You are an environmentalist because you love our planet. To call others into environmentalism, we should therefore appeal to the same love in them. It is not only ineffectual but also insulting to offer someone a venal reason to act ecologically when we ourselves are doing it for love.

Nonetheless, environmental campaigning relies heavily on scare tactics. Fear might stimulate a few gestures of activism, but it does not sustain long-term commitment. It strengthens the habits of self-protection, but what we need is to strengthen the habits of service.

Why then do so many of us name "fear that we won't have a livable planet" as the motive for their activism? I think it is to make that activism acceptable within the ideological framework I have described that takes an instrumentalist view of the planet. When we embrace what I believe is the true motive—love for this Earth—we veer close to the territory that the cynic derides. What is it to make 'rational' choices, after all? Is it ever really rational to choose from love? In particular, is it rational to love something that isn't even alive? But the truth is, we love the Earth for what it is, not merely for what it provides.

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I suspect that even the most hardheaded environmentalist, who derides the Earth-is-alive crowd most vociferously, harbors a secret longing for the very object of his contempt. Deep down, he too believes the planet and everything on it is alive and sacred. He is afraid to touch that knowledge, even as he longs for it. Often, his intellectual reasons are but rationalizations by which he gives himself permission to act

on his felt understanding of what is sacred.

This person is all of us. I am no exception: the idea of a living, sentient Earth attracts me and repels me both, mirroring the polarity of opinion I observe at conferences between the nuts-and-bolts and spiritual factions. Accusations of 'naive!,' 'softheaded!' and 'gullible' rattle around in my own brain, expressing a hurting thing within. Maybe if I join the ranks of the critics and turn the criticism outward, accuse others of ignoring science and indulging in fuzzy thinking, I can find some temporary relief. But there is no real healing in that. I want to be whole. I want to feel more and not less. I want to heal these alienated parts of myself, so that I don't act from them unconsciously and sabotage the beautiful vision that asks my contribution.

Each of us (in an industrial society) wades against the tide of an old ideology as we dare to act from the felt understanding of our intimate connection to life, our interdependency, our interbeing. Critiques of the idea of a living planet make that struggle all the harder. In the interests of honesty as well as effective strategy, we need to look at the fear and pain that that critique comes from. Then we can get people in touch with their perception of a living sacred planet, so they can feel the grief and love that perception opens, and act upon it.

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