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## CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION

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*By Lisa Kretz*

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*The Montréal Review, September 2013*

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### Past Present

We are always cloaked in what has come before. But for decades I have held close to my heart a belief I discovered in Helene Cixous' *Laugh of the Medusa*. She explains:

The Future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovably the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative.

Reading human history reveals a story of children needing to be taught the same lessons generation after generation. Denying determinism is not to deny the necessity of never forgetting the wisdom contained by a past remembered and reflected on. Audre Lorde says in *Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference* that we suffer from chronic historical amnesia. We reinvent what was long known to our elders.

The "generation gap" is an important social tool for any repressive society. If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all important question, "Why?" This gives rise to a historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread.

The we I speak of, the we I am appealing to, is the human community. Much as we are a broken family, we are all family. We are all born naked and screaming in and from Mother Earth. Our matter will mix with her when our days as physical selves, which gesture at the contours of individuation, disappear. We share skin and bone and muscle. We share heart. We share our presence in this beating moment.

### The Story that Ends with Today

When I read back I see the shape and possible results of the story change depending on the starting assumptions. If you assume that certain things are not possible, and thus not useful to try, you ensure they will not be pursued. As a result their impossibility is “confirmed” by starting assumptions rather than by repeated attempts and conclusive failure.

Possibilities increase when unnecessary and unsubstantiated limitations are shaken off, when imaginative possibilities are presented as wide, deep, and unlimited rather than narrow, shallow and limited. Imagination, like love, is without limit. Possibilities increase when the current dominant categories and contrasts are seen to be just one way of looking. The longer you think in one direction the more congealed those concepts get, the more trodden those mental pathways. Formative stories of the structure of the ideal world were, for me, often philosophical stories.

### A Familiar Tale

In Plato's *Republic* Socrates invites his friends to imagine an ideal society. He weaves a tale of justice premised on the ideal of rationality. Each community member does what they are best at both at the level of the individual and the level of the community - justice involves the healthy functioning of your soul and the healthy functioning of the parts of the city state.

Within yourself you must let the rational principle rule over your spirit and appetites. Your spirit is the locus of your emotion; it is your impetus to action. Appetites are the locus of your physical need. Plato believes both are ideally dominated by reason.

Within the city you must let the rational kings and queens rule over the spirited guardians and the farmers and artisans. The guardians are the warrior subset of the population that act to protect the city as a whole. The farmers and artisans are those who provide for, and attend

to, basic physical needs. Plato believes both are ideally dominated by reason.

Plato's account addresses human psychology with reason conceptualized as the ideal ruler. In particular he takes women and slaves to be prone to emotional domination and the correlative - at least on his analysis - irrationality. Such individuals were to be reigned-in, harnessed, controlled, rather than lead.

## Dogmas Old and New

Following the rise and control of the church - which carried absolute authority and dogma that changed to suit the needs of the controlling minority - a new way of imagining ideal relations between humans came to the fore. The story of the social contract was elaborated to illustrate the need and possibility of living differently.

Thomas Hobbes, for example, denies the divine right of kings in the *Leviathan*. Hobbes argues each man is equally capable in mind and body, with the aid of technology, to destroy others. We are all sufficiently intelligent to devise effective ways to kill others should we desire to. Given this baseline equality, as rational individuals we will recognize it is unwise not to form a commonwealth wherein a leader can serve to overawe the multitude. The fear of that leadership will remove us from a state of nature, a state of war, a state of perpetual fear, a state where life is nasty, brutish and short. Thus recognition of basic equality - albeit an equality reflecting our capacity to destroy each other - rooted this construction of ideal relations.

John Locke adopted a religious perspective and took the basic equality of men to hang in their being designed as such by God. Locke argues that even in the absence of belief in God, even with a secular orientation, due to shared reasoning capacities alone we will be lead to the same conclusions he draws.

He takes God to have gifted the earth for men's use. Indeed any land not being used, any unscathed nature, is waste on his analysis. But starting from this premise of equality - based not in fear of each other's capacity to kill, but in our like interest in the preservation our person, liberty and property - we consciously decide to build communities. The conclusion of Locke's narrative is democracy premised on the desire for rightful ownership and use of land.

It is interesting to note, though, that modern democracies have adopted Locke's ideology of

a natural right to property while shirking the corollary. Locke says that basic equality requires that no person may have more than their share while another is in lack, that each may only take that which is necessary and any excess must be shared.

The domination of reason was a response to the domination of dogma. Though the change in leadership was a step in the right direction – toward an open-minded epistemology searching for support, not dictation - the continuation of an enterprise of domination was left unquestioned.

Building a story using the characteristics of a rampant worship of individualism, human identity premised primarily on rational self-interest, an obsession with private property and a conception of nature as resource lead to a predictable conclusion. The accumulation and production of property in excess lead to the destruction of the environment, people, and those elements of the self not celebrated by the individualistic, rationalistic, self-interested model.

In counter-response a different sort of story materialized about sharing the results of the shared human work we do. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels saw the results of property being in the hands of the few at the expense of the many and again – the demands of basic equality were identified as not being met. Marx and Engels chart the history of power dynamics wherein a powerful minority exploit the labor of a disempowered majority.

When the majority are brought into close contact with each other, for example in a factory, where they can see the strength of their numbers while simultaneously bearing witness to the functioning of power and its grave imbalances, a new liberatory narrative becomes possible. In solidarity, as a majority, the shift of power is only a revolution away. Or so the story goes.

Today the contrast between the bourgeoisie (the owners of capital and the machinery of production) and the proletariat (the workers who must work to survive on a wage that is of necessity not representative of the net value of what they produce) is manifest in the dominance of corporations and the exploitation of the majority. Third world countries are exploited while first world countries pocket the fiscal advantages of human and environmental exploitation.

If the preservation of rational self-interest is taken to be the primary motivation for all social and political systems, and if happiness is said to be the goal of rational self-interested

behavior, then it needs be noted that increased material wealth beyond needs doesn't result in increased happiness. The evidence mounting, ironically, indicates that those living in first world nations are disproportionately less happy than those who lack its excess of material goods.

I think part of the problem is that many of the gentlemen I mention, many of the authors touted to be significant shapers of human history, have imaginings of ideals based on an incomplete and imbalanced notion of human psychology, human wellness and human motivation. In so far as it does reflect one type of outlook on the world, one that is supported by the positioning of privilege and dominance, it is neither representative of the perspective of others nor justifiable given the exploitation, ignorance, and immorality it rests on.

When John Rawls rejuvenated the old social contract tale he gave it a new spin. Imagine, he said, if you didn't know what kind of body you were going to land in when you were born. Imagine you didn't know what class you would belong to, what country you would reside in, how intelligent you would be, how practically wise you would be, what your gender is, who you like to be romantic with in consensual adult relationships, what spiritual orientation you have, and so on. He says when you imagine that you are ignorant about these things it is like putting on a veil of ignorance about your future.

I like to think of it as your life about to happen on the world stage, and the velvet curtain is still down. Until that curtain is lifted you have no idea of what your role, your character, will be in the play. In so far as you don't know where you are going to land you are in an ideal position to construct the most just political systems; you are behind the veil of ignorance. What each of us would be willing to accept as a reasonable contract for social relations is that which is to the advantage of all. Rawls thought this would lead to us all maximizing equality and civil liberty, and only affording differential power and wealth if it is to the advantage of all – especially those least well off.

This story reveals how much of the way we are treated and the possibilities we are afforded is a direct result of the contingencies of birth. It is a matter of luck whether you are, for example, born into a rich family or not, into a third world country or not, into an age of ecological collapse or not. Given how much is a matter of luck, and given that each child is born innocent of any culpability, born undeserving of depravity, there is no reason why one child should have the world handed to them while another is disenfranchised.

As important as Rawls' social contract story is he failed to see how his vision of justice was limited by his existing perspective - his neo-liberal conceptions of the primacy of individual freedom and wealth secured by contract in the form of constitutional law failed to highlight the pervasive political and social relations that are not best illustrated using a social contract story.

Rawls thought he could imagine what differently placed others would take to be an ideal socio-political set-up without asking them. That is mistake number one; everyone would want to be asked to share their insight. Indeed the insights of those who are oppressed - those who have to play very close attention to how oppression functions to survive - have greater knowledge of how systematic oppression functions than those over-privileged few who can maintain obliviousness because their survival does not rest on satisfying members of the dominant class. Rather, the over-privileged few can placate themselves with what Peggy McIntosh calls the myth of meritocracy, a myth that suggests life is what you make it and if you work hard enough anyone can succeed. It is a myth imagined to justify the continued imbalances – through foisting blame on those hard done by rather than accepting responsibility for one's role in keeping injustice in place.

Rawls thought similarly placed white men had the imaginative excellence to predict what billions of others occupying different socially and politically constructed positions, facing more or less oppression, would want to contribute behind the veil of ignorance. I think we have no clue what a just system would look like until we listen to those most hard done by current allocations of wealth, by current notions of what it is to be an ideal human, by current political and economic experiments. Every perspective is an insight, an angle not yet seen – ideal knowledge is orchestrating these voices rooted in mutual support and growing through perpetual questioning. At present the din of cacophony, acted out with violence, is the yelling of so many people feeling like they will never be heard.

What Rawls' story also fails to highlight is the other basic ways we are fundamentally connected to each other. Our social systems depend on non-codified relations of trust, support, family, and friendship. They involve intellectual and artistic cooperation without the faintest concern for copyright. Functional human being depends on the free exchange of goods and service motivated by good-heartedness. A story of ideal justice relegated to the realm of political contracts established through law is fundamentally incomplete.

## Inclusion, Listening

The stories so far were primarily those of rich men of a creamy puce color, whose perspectives often complimented each other. The trajectory of this story dominated while those treated as “other” - people who are not puce colored, people who are not “men” (as dictated by biological genital inheritance), people who are not fiscally wealthy, people who are queer, people who are disabled by the current structuring of life - were silenced. Those who were perceived as “other” by a dominant minority, those who were in fact the vast majority, failed to be given a platform for their voices. The voices of non-human “others”, those living beings who are members of our Earth family, were rarely recognized as existing let alone listened to. The limited authorship made for limited insight.

In the background of the developing political narratives that underwrite current western paradigms was the scientific revolution, with its potent reductivism and physicalism. To “justify” destroying a relationship of love and respect with Mother Earth, Francis Bacon created a narrative of control and submission. He sought to transform her from a source of magic, mystery and myth to a resource for destruction and consumption. We must take, he said, violently and forcefully because what was wanted would not be given freely. This was when she stopped being widely referred to as Mother and became “resource.”

Part of the tension of today, I think, rests on an unjustified equivocation between reason and science and pitting them against dogmatic faith and belief in the intangible. Hobbes took reason to provide a counter to the irrationality of religious dogma; who would deny this to be a move in the right direction? Dogma, in any form, is destructive. Dogma counters open-hearted, open-minded, thinking. Dogma demands obedience in the absence of understanding. But faith need not be dogmatic, and that which is intangible need be no less real for being unable to be described reductively. Faith in the human capacity for goodness grounds hope in a more compassionate future, love is more closely approximated in a poem than a reductive analysis of the brain activity had by someone in love (and even then the poetry gestures rather than defines). The experience of love remains hidden if looked in on from the outside, and from the inside there is no reduction that can capture it. It is no less real for having meaning that escapes scientific reduction. In the absence of the more intangible, that which is impossible to pin-down/make static/control, we have a narrative stripped of poetry, mystery and magic. The part has been taken to be the whole. Our earth is being cut, pressed, moulded to fit a limited notion of what “it” is believed to be by some; denied the complexity necessary for continuance she is dying. Fragments reflecting

dominant ideology are being stamped onto a threatened planet; with an increasingly technologized embodiment being generated to manifest the death that is complete control.

Dogmas should always be suspect; but these are not to be confused with starting premises. We still need places to hold on to. We still need shared concepts to build a language premised on understanding. And if the only starting beliefs taken to count are the ones that make sense to a minority of unhealthily-privileged folks who aren't willing to listen to the starting ground of others and seeing what that adds to the discussion, then you've got didactic preaching rather than dialectic learning. Reason is lovely, but so is emotion – they are necessary compliments to human life but the dominance of reason has beaten emotion into submission. And historically it is the enslaved “others” identified with emotion. Those in power have been trying to navigate life and relationships without recourse to the wisdom of our hearts.

And here is where I feel/think it gets hopeful. We are at this crux in history. The world is erupting with the fallout of the ecological holocaust we have set in motion, and protest is erupting because of an increased understanding of how imbalanced our world currently is: how unfair, how unjust, and how hard. There is an increased understanding of how much unnecessary suffering is at our own hands and those of fellow human beings. Amidst the war, greed, and destruction the world still has strongholds beauty, compassion, diversity, celebration of the mystery of existence, devotion to the good, and peace. In fact, in their absence, existing social and political structures would collapse.

If we look to history we see many paradigm shifts through ideological revision followed by bloody revolution. And I'm feeling/thinking that the women's rights movement was peaceful and effective, that Mahatma Ghandi helped lead a country to freedom using peaceful protest, and that Martin Luther King inspired love as a response to hate and it won the civil rights movement. And I'm also feeling/thinking that the dominance of reason at the expense of emotion needs remedying. Oppressed “others” have been socialized to have an exquisite awareness of emotional function, well-being, and how to tend to the hurts of the heart. “Others” have a deep knowledge of not only the problematic inner workings of oppression but fecund dreams of alternative ways of being. There are volumes of understanding already recorded in living memories of diversely coloured and cultured narratives, narrations with multiple interpretations and therefore multiple understandings of histories and futures. We don't need another bloody revolution - an acting out of pain and fear. Instead of blood-shed we need blood flowing through our fully living selves, consciously choosing conscious

evolution. We need an act of listening - an acting out of compassion and love. If I've been listening correctly for as long as I learned the art, then I don't feel/think we need a new dominant narrative, we need an unending sharing of diverse stories constantly open to revisioning. What is needed, I feel/think, is an evolution of consciousness. I imagine a conscious, emotional, rational reorientation to the world where we deeply value the multiple dimensions of health for all, and we do everything in our power to bring it into being. It isn't a violent reaction that is needed; reactions are responses to what has come before. Reaction is opposition as opposed to vision. Conscious evolution is compassionate liberation with direction. What I feel/think we need is for all the voices of the oppressed to join in writing a narrative of new ways of being. I feel/think it wise to give our hearts, our emotional intelligence, a central role in generating the next page. Crisis contains opportunity in so far as it opens wide a chasm of possibility for great change, and the only limitation I can perceive regarding what our future will look like is a limitation of imagination. Serendipitously, for us, imagination is unlimited when set free.

*An emotional paradigm shift can happen in a heartbeat.*

*Good ideas can spread at the speed of sound. 🍁*

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Acknowledgements: My sincere gratitude to David Kretz and Stephen Rowe for their thoughtful and generous recommendations on earlier drafts.

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