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## Returning to humanity's moral heritages

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### ABSTRACT

The main arguments of my lecture were how humans are failing themselves and devastating earth's biosphere, at least in part, because they became uncooperative with two key ecological inheritances: raising the young within the human evolved developmental niche and, as part of this, facilitating the development of a deep attachment to, knowledge of and respect for their local landscape of other-than-human entities. Without humanity's return to these cooperative evolutionary roots, the species will be doomed, along with many other-than-human beings. The now-widespread mental illness of 'human supremacism' that results from these missing pieces has spread around the planet and is destroying ecological integrity. The 'Sacred Money and Markets' story (SMM) that David Korten criticizes and I briefly discuss is a symptom of these missing pieces of human inheritance. We must return to a Sacred Life and Living Earth story with lifestyles to match.

### KEYWORDS

Human nature; ecology; flourishing; indigenous; evolved developmental niche

I thank the commentators Susana Frisanchi and Enrique Delgado and Gerhard Minnameier for their thoughtful responses to my 2015 Kohlberg Memorial Lecture. I review my main points and extend them to clarify what may have been misunderstood and present reactions to some of the points made by the commentators.

The main arguments of my lecture were how humans are failing themselves and devastating earth's biosphere, at least in part, because they became uncooperative with two key ecological inheritances: raising the young within the human evolved developmental niche and, as part of this, facilitating the development of a deep attachment to, knowledge of and respect for their local landscape of other-than-human entities. Without humanity's return to these cooperative evolutionary roots, the species will be doomed, along with many other-than-human beings. The now-widespread mental illness of 'human supremacism' that results from these missing pieces has spread around the planet and is destroying ecological integrity (Jensen, 2016). The 'Sacred Money and Markets' story (SMM) that David Korten (2015) criticizes and I briefly discuss is a symptom of these missing pieces of human inheritance. Deracinated humans are susceptible to the SMM which further squashes a sense of oneness with other-than-humans.

On the other hand, the ‘Sacred Life and Living Earth’ story guided most of humanity for most of its presence on the earth. Many indigenous peoples of the world still embrace this view and demonstrate our ecological inheritances (though less and less as the global culture is imposed on them). It is our moral responsibility to reflect on the dominant damaging worldview and reform it with the help of sustainable indigenous wisdom. Part of this, I agree with Frisancho and Delgado (2016), is to engage in democratic discussion and action that includes respecting indigenous equality and rights. At the same time, traditional knowledge for living sustainably on and with the earth needs to be integrated into the scientific knowledge we have gathered in recent centuries.

Let me clarify a few points. I was surprised to learn the various pieces of information that I knit together in my lecture (the Evolved Developmental Niche, ecological attachment, human divorce from living on the earth, which are more fully discussed in my 2014 book, *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture and Wisdom*). From anthropological research, I was startled to learn how very different the worldviews, cultures and personalities are within small-band hunter-gatherer (SBHG) societies (Narvaez, 2013). Then I discovered in anthropological research what we call the Evolved Developmental Niche, whose components we now can assess empirically, measure to some degree their influence on the ongoing dynamic development of a child and link them to adult outcomes (Narvaez, Wang, & Cheng, *in press*; Narvaez et al., 2013).

The bottom line for human development is that humans have not evolved away from being mammals whose development is dynamic and biosocial. We are still born nine- to 18-months early compared to our primate cousins; and we are much more epigenetically shaped than any other animal (Gómez-Robles, Hopkins, Schapiro, & Sherwood, 2015). Species-typical postnatal care is critical for developing human potential. Forming emotional and body-sensory intelligence is essential for human flourishing (Abram, 1996; Panksepp, 1998), and it best develops in a species-typical nest.

So my focus on SBHG lifeways in my lecture was not a matter of idealizing the past but an examination of the processes of development in our 99%, before these ecological processes were corrupted by a detached, supremacist worldview. Why do SBHG develop such different personalities and capacities? Why are they content with so little materially? Why do they live *with* the earth instead of *against* it? The answers include the evolved developmental niche, a socially and ecologically embedded self and ecological attachment. We might describe their form of living sustainably as a form of *ecological expertise*. My aim then becomes to discuss how to restore humanity’s ecological expertise as a creature of the earth, as a member of a *biocracy* (Berry, 1988). We need to understand our human heritages and honor them. This is a moral enterprise.

Native American perspectives are helpful for understanding how educators can proceed in this direction—by beholding the wisdom in nature and grounding our lessons in it (Cajete, 2000, 2015; see Four Arrows, this issue). As David Orr (1991) learned from studying traditional knowledge systems:

Traditional knowledge is rooted in a local culture. It is a source of community cohesion, a framework that explains the origins of things (cosmology), and provides the basis for preserving fertility, controlling pests, and conserving biological diversity and genetic variability. Knowledge is not separated from the multiple tasks of living well in a special place over a long period of time. . . *The crisis of sustainability has occurred only when and where this union between knowledge, livelihood, and loving has been broken* and knowledge is used for the single purpose of increasing productivity. (pp.31–32; emphasis added)

Along these lines in his commentary, Minnemaier discusses private property as if such a construct is ‘normal.’ He provides an interesting discussion of natural law, noting how children do not initially respect property. This is not a surprise. Demand sharing is a part of small-band hunter-gatherer life. That is, everything is shared. No one ‘owns’ anything except their autonomy. So, to say that children naturally follow this type of natural law—the sharing of resources, like all animals do—is not a surprise. Indeed, children have to be punished into notions of property and into hierarchy, because these are not part of our evolved heritage. In property-oriented societies, punishment to learn respect of other’s ownership is considered good and necessary. Unfortunately, it is the ownership and coercion of living beings that leads to the destruction of the evolved developmental niche, ecological attachment, as well as other-than-human life. An economic system that takes human supremacy for granted and focuses on the welfare of corporations instead of living beings of all forms is at the very least misguided, if not a highly destructive force. Just because those involved in economic systems *aim* to be cooperative, it does not mean they are cooperative, especially if they have a truncated worldview that sees the earth as a set of resources to exploit for whom-ever gets there first, a form of *dis*-honorably harvest (see Kimmerer, 2013, for honorable harvest principles practiced by traditional indigenous societies, as mentioned in the lecture [Narvaez, 2016]). Nature’s economy is a gift economy of giving and taking, each according to their needs to survive and thrive. But an SMM orientation assumes and promotes greed rather than cooperation and mutualism, which otherwise predominate in natural systems.

The species *atypicality* of ‘civilized’ societies and their guiding narratives brings me to another reaction to the studies that Minnameier (2016) brings up. We must be cautious about drawing conclusions about human nature from psychological experiments. *Most of the people studied by psychologists are raised in a species-atypical manner, without the evolved developmental niche.* So, one must provide various caveats and not jump to generalizations about ‘children being naturally acquisitive.’ Moreover, these experiments are done in societies that focus on taking and keeping property. From what we can tell examining practices in small-band hunter-gatherer societies, most humans through most of human history are not so possessive.

As Thomas Berry (1988) has pointed out, modern societies have been transfixed on technological progress that promises a future ‘wonderland’ but in effect is creating a planetary wasteland in every way imaginable. Earth *dis*-attachment and *disenchantment* is part of what has driven science, economics and even mainstream religious traditions of the past centuries. What is considered *unquestionably* sacred has shifted from the earth, its systems and life forms, to money, property and progress. Question assumptions about the latter today and most people think you are crazy. Indeed, it is hard to perceive alternatives. As Derrick Jensen (2016) points out:

Most exploiters cannot imagine life without the benefits of their exploitation, and, perhaps more importantly, cannot imagine that anyone else could imagine going through life being any less exploitative than they are. Many slave owners cannot imagine life without slave labor. Many pimps cannot imagine life without prostituting women. Many abusers cannot imagine life without those they routinely abuse. *And many addicts cannot imagine life without their addictions, whether to heroin, crack, television, the internet, entitlement, power, economic growth, technological escalation, electricity, or industrial civilization.* (p. 330; emphasis added)

But there *are* alternatives. If we are going to avoid completely destroying every vertebrate species on the planet, we must wake ourselves up and shift to an enlightened awareness.<sup>1</sup>

We can expand our imaginations to understand what we are doing and learn alternatives worldviews and lifeways exist. And we must wake up our hearts (Bourgeault, 2003). Instead of falling prey to the “normal nihilism” of numbness, distraction and indifference’ and to the ‘apathetic fallacy’ of ‘denying feeling or stance to all but human life,’ we must become *re-enchanted* with the earth (Mooney, 2009, p. 11, p. 5).

## Note

1. Here are some books that are good for self-education about the receptive intelligence and expansive ecological attachment of our cousins: *Original Wisdom* by Robert Wolff; *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn; *The Great Work* by Thomas Berry; *The World We Used to Live in* by Vine Deloria; *Nature and Madness* by Paul Shepard; *A Time before Deception* by Tom Cooper.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Darcia Narvaez*’ research explores questions of moral cognition and moral development over the lifespan in multiple contexts (e.g., family, school). She examines how early life experience influences moral functioning and moral character in children and adults. She integrates neurobiological, clinical, developmental and education sciences in her theories and research about moral development.

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