

Abundance and scarcity: concepts and rhetoric in ecology, economics, and eco-ethics

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The notions of abundance and scarcity lie at the heart of the current debate between those in business and most economists on one side, and the growing number of those concerned with the ecological fate of the earth on the other.

We are, by any account, more materially wealthy than at any other time in history; even the middle classes can afford a level of affluence that was the preserve of kings not so long ago. The increases in technology and communication have made life extremely comfortable. Stock markets are booming, and suddenly everyone is talking about stocks, bonds, portfolios, following the markets more than they are following the weather. American economists speak confidently of a new era of continuing growth fueled by technological developments, where the periodic contractions of the market can be avoided. The neo-liberalist school of free-market economics paints a rosy picture of ever-increasing affluence produced by developments in technology, combined with the liberalization of global commerce.

There is a sense of material abundance: we have ever-increasing material possessions, ever more choices and amounts of food, ever more world travel, instant world-wide communications, indeed we have ever-expanding horizons on all sides. There is economic abundance; material things abound; there is plenty, a sense of richness and well-being. This ever-expanding economic abundance is predicated on continuing growth, on the continuing extraction of resources, the continuing manufacture of consumer items spurred by new technological developments, and the continuing liberalization of world-trade in removing the last obstacles to a global economy(1).

Against this sense of plenty and ever-expanding horizons, the main thrust of the ecological consciousness movement that has been growing over the last few decades has been the elaboration of the need for a limit to our runaway consumption and production of waste. Those in the ecological movement argue for a natural boundary: our resources are not unlimited, and there are unexpected limits of which we have only recently become aware. Our worry about the oil

reserves left in the world has been supplanted by a different limit and a different worry; even if we have plenty of oil left, we cannot burn it all since it will contribute too much to global warming.

A consensus is emerging that we cannot maintain this rate of depletion of natural resources. The main point is that the resources we have for so long considered to be limitless and free, such as clean air, clean water and a temperate climate, are in fact not unlimited; we are running up against the limits of the carrying capacity of the planetary eco-system. There is still some argument as to what precisely these limits are: while early doomsday scenarios of Malthusians in the sixties and seventies focused on population growth, the population has not risen as fast as projected and the carrying capacity of the earth has increased dramatically.

This is in essence the point of contention between the cornucopians and those who see limits to our growth (2). A cornucopian like Julian Simon argues that human ingenuity, technology, and economic development have and always will provide a solution to any environmental or resource challenge. For example, the problem of having more mouths to feed will be solved by the development of genetically engineered crops with a higher yield, or crops which grow in desert conditions. The energy crisis will be solved by increased efficiency, making nuclear energy safe, or perhaps by an unknown factor such as a breakthrough in fusion research. The human capacity for adapting and carrying on has always been greater than the crises that have faced us. One of the merits of Simon's argument is that it shows us that we have more than a static set of tools to face any coming challenges.

The other camp, represented here by Norman Myers, argues that there are inherent limits to the earth's carrying capacity, that there are certain thresholds which we are overstepping right at this moment. Our material development has a deleterious effect on other species; species are vanishing at a faster rate now than ever through loss of habitat and pollution. Our exponential growth patterns are coming up against some clear and unshakable limits: humans are already using 40% of all of earth's resources (3), and with both our population and standard of living set to double in the next forty years, we will clearly be facing some momentous breakdown before then if we continue at present rates of extraction and consumption. Even at our present consumption levels, there is hardly any space left for other forms of life.

The problem, of course, is compounded by the fact that many of these environmental problems are long-term processes the effects of which we are just beginning to feel but the results of which will be catastrophic: the erosion of topsoil in the world's richest agricultural areas, the depletion of aquifers, the buildup of crud and silt, the depletion of fisheries, and long-term pollution problems such as dioxin finding its way through the food chain. Mother's milk is so toxic in some countries that it would not pass food safety standards. These problems have long incubation periods and are cumulative - a point of no-return will be reached. According to many scientists, the point where irreparable damage has been done has already come and gone; the question now is how much we can cushion and repair this damage.

The argument from the ecological camp, then, is one of scarcity, of a lack of limitless natural resources. Michel Serres puts it succinctly: "the Earth cannot give to all its children that which the rich wrest from it today. There is scarcity" (4). Opposed to the material abundance of the neo-liberal free-traders, the ecological camp stresses the fact that the planetary eco-system has limited resources which are fast being depleted. According to the Gaia thesis, the earth itself is a living organism which can only support so much use and abuse. There is not enough clean air and clean water and space at the present ever-increasing levels of consumption for all of us, although there may be enough for some of us. Indeed we find that the wealth of the richest group of people on earth is also exponentially increasing (5). Unless there is a pretty drastic change in our consumption patterns, style and method, we are headed towards environmental ruin.

The battle-lines seem to be drawn between economic abundance and ecological scarcity. Of course both the word "economics" and "ecology" hearken back to the *oikos*, the living space or habitat, to our home and environment as individuals, communities, and species - the *nomos* of the *oikos* and the *logos* of the *oikos*. Although these words in their common English usage are rather far removed from their etymology, it is still worth pointing out the close kinship between the two. The *nomos* of the *oikos* is concerned with the distribution of resources and wealth, and the structure of that distribution, the regulation of the flow of wealth within the *oikos*. There is also a *logos* to the *oikos*: ecology consists in considering the discourse and logic of the earth itself, which is rather different from the regulation of the *nomos*. Ecological thinking considers the *logos* of the *oikos* itself, not considered merely from the point of view of its *nomos*-use, its economic use.

Against the abundance of economics and technological innovation, against the bounty in comfort and material wealth, then, we find an ecological notion of scarcity. Several concepts of limit have been put forward: Ivan Illich talks about a sense of discipline in our usage and consumption, or *askesis*. *Askesis* means taking less than we need and using less than we need: our wants and desires are subordinated to an ecologically sustainable supply of goods. Michel Serres proposes then notion of self-restraint: “reason puts aside some reason to restrain itself” (6). We can take more but we should restrain ourselves from doing so, even and especially when it lies within our power do so: "To enjoy power and not take advantage of it is the beginning of wisdom, of civilization"(7).

Against the concept of economic abundance, of free trade, open markets, the information super-highway, of everyone getting into stocks, and of the ever-quickenning pace of the use of energy, resources, money, and innovation, we find an ecological sense of self-restraint, of self-imposed limits, or of *askesis*.

But perhaps things are not as they seem. The problem lies not with the use of the concepts of abundance and scarcity, but with the rhetoric of abundance. Indeed, the rhetoric of material abundance is a flawed rhetoric, and one which pushes the ecological camp into a position of arguing for a notion of scarcity. The problem lies with the nature of our present economic system. The problem is no longer the technological system - whereas it used to be technology versus the environment, it has now become economics versus the environment. Scientific research itself has had to become economically viable, and technological development is also subordinate to economic constraints. Although Microsoft gets praised as an example of technological innovation, its success is actually based on the clever and merciless marketing of a technologically inferior product. The bottom line of the free market is where we are all headed to: local governments and governmental agencies, community services and university department as well as companies have to become efficient in the pursuit of high and quick returns on investment.

But the fundamental concept of economics is scarcity: a thing has value in terms of its scarcity: the price of diamonds, gold, oil or coffee are set according to their relative scarcity, real or anticipated. Clean air and clean water were until very recently without any economic value, and it

is still very difficult to factor in environmental values into economic calculations (8). This scarcity of goods can be artificially maintained through monopolistic or proprietary practices, or, as in the case of the price of oil in the early nineties, an abundance of cheap goods can be defended in the Gulf by “politics by other means”. Another look at our so-called abundant materiality reveals scarcity gone wild. Scarcity lies at the basis of economic theory; it supports the economic structure and fuels the engine of economic growth. Advertising, which ceaselessly encourages economic consumption and therefore economic growth, is a response to a lack, a scarcity within us, a deep-felt psychological need for reassurance through consumption. We are not cool unless we have a new sporty automobile; our fragile egos are strengthened by the latest perfumes and brand-name fashion, and new computer gadgets keep us occupied. There is a constant appeal to needs within us, to the hungry ghosts whose hunger can never be appeased.

Moreover, the globalization of the free-market economy exports this concept and experience of scarcity to the so-called Third World, exports this sense of scarcity to societies and cultures where this sense of scarcity never existed, where there was no concept of consumer economics and ever-increasing growth rates. The lack and need represented by this feeling of scarcity lies in a very human character trait: *greed*. The booming stock market of the last few years is testimony to the allure of greed; portfolios advertise with annual returns of 40 percent on investment through dubious and risky manipulations, as if an annual return on investment of 40 percent is something any business could produce for any length of time. We are addicted to the continuous growth and expansion of our economies, to the ever-expanding production of consumer goods and the concomitant production of waste.

My central point here is to argue that the rhetoric of material abundance masks the fact that the fundamental concept of economics is in reality scarcity. Conversely, although ecologists, confronted with the rhetoric of material abundance, have been forced to argue for a concept of scarcity and self-restraint, the fundamental concept of the *logos* of our *oikos*, of life on earth, is abundance. Abundance, from the Latin *ab-unda*, from the water, the wave, that which over-flows, is the sense of bounty, of plenty, the sense of living things and life itself which flowers and grows. The luxurious growth of the natural forest, the inherent goodness of air and water, the fullness of the harvest (we say: an abundant year), the bounty of vegetable and animal life are indeed the *logos* of our *oikos*.

We can simply put it in terms of “scarcity thinking” versus “abundance thinking”. Scarcity thinking is linked to fear and unfulfilled needs; abundance is a sense of plenty in life, a sense of the bounty of living. Perhaps this distinction can be illustrated through the philosophical discussion of the gift (9). In one sense, a gift is an exchange; when it comes down to it, a gift is always exchanged for something else, and complex systems of mutual gift-giving have evolved in different societies and different cultures. But the notion of exchange is already an economic notion, pointing to the beginning of barter and trade: I give something but I get something else for it in return. A gift in this sense of exchange, in this economic sense, partakes not of the notion of abundance but rather of that of scarcity; the gift is in a way conditional upon the expected return on one’s investment. Can we then not conceive of the generosity of a gift given without expectation of return, conceive of a true gift rather than an investment?

“Gift” means not only a “present” but also a “talent”, as when we speak of a gifted person. There are musical, artistic, even commercial gifts. In this sense, a gift is given without expectation of a return. Our talents are given, even if they have to be developed through practice. Life itself, in a spiritual sense, is a continuous giving without thought of return. The sun is burning itself out without thought or sense of return. Plant life is ceaselessly growing, giving of its bounty without thought or sense of return. And we, as human beings, are gifts without return - what on earth would a return on a life lived to the full be, or an investment return on the unfolding of a life understood and lived as a gift? Life, in its essence, is not a return for something else. It is this sense of gift, generosity and abundance without return which does not fall under the rhetoric of exchange. Moreover, some values do not partake of economic exchange: indeed, for some values, the more one gives, the more receives, and the more one produces in turn. This is the fundamental quality of love in all its various guises, such as trust, or care, or friendship.

Distinct from economics and ecology, eco-ethics is concerned with the *ethos* of the *oikos*, with the human sense of the good to be found in the *oikos* in which we dwell. In other words, a moral sense of what it means to be human beings living on earth. Eco-ethics can provide a study of the value and concepts involved in the rhetoric of abundance, the rhetorical game which puts ecological thinking on the defensive, and can help us distinguish an appeal to the base human

instinct of greed from a more spiritual sense of being human. Human beings, as a life-form, are naturally generous, abundant in their being.

The “celebration” of material and economic abundance is nothing but a celebration of human greed, of scarcity, of human pain, human fear, and unchecked human desire. Economic thinking projects these human values onto the *oikos*, onto the practice of the world stage. A celebration of natural abundance, on the other hand, is a celebration on many levels: on the level of nature, on the level of the world, the *oikos*; a celebration of the gifts that we are as human beings (we are all the same in that we are all unique). It is a celebration of the chance to develop our talents, to bring them to fruition, to give through the exercise of our gifts, to be of service. A celebration, then, of the spiritual aspirations of human beings; as Marco Olivetti tells us, becoming human is what is calling us, what we are working toward; it is not our starting point (11). Becoming human is something worth striving toward, which is realized through our life.

This reversal in the attribution of the concepts of abundance and scarcity is not merely a correction of a rhetorical ploy. The nature of the argument from the ecological side changes. Even though many of the practical proposals put forward by ecological thinkers for a sustainable world, from energy taxes to alternative manufacturing practices to a rediscovery of the local, would remain the same, there is a crucial shift in emphasis. It is the difference between arguing for *enough* and for *plenty*; although these words are close in meaning, their connotations are rather different: “just enough” suggests that we are barely scraping by, that there is a voluntary or an involuntary restriction on our use, consumption, or enjoyment. Plenty, on the other hand, is a synonym of abundance, of bounty: to have plenty is to have “more than enough”, “more than one needs”, plenty to enjoy, use or consume. Enough and plenty can refer to the same amount of goods or energy usage: the crucial difference is one of *attitude*, the difference between coming from a position of scarcity and coming from a position of abundance.

The abundance inherent in life and nature is something which human beings can only partially glimpse, experience or comprehend. Our senses have to filter out most levels of experience to get by in the practical world. The overflow of experience cannot be exhaustively mined; there is a constant overflow of energy, of giving, of joy which we cannot all take in at the same time. We are the ones who limit our attention to the world, our attunement to it, and sometimes seek artificial realities.

Another way of defining the concept of natural abundance I wish to develop here comes from examining the concept of excess. To exceed is to go over the limits of the rational, the reasonable, the socially or morally appropriate. Transcending, exceeding, going beyond a certain limit. Our present consumption patterns and the production of waste are excessive in this way: every single person in the industrialized world directly or indirectly produces 15,000 kilos, or approximately 200 times their own weight, in waste products every year (12). Some of these waste products are so toxic to life-forms that they cannot be recycled in any way in the production process. This is the sense of excessive consumption, excessive production, excessive deforestation and depletion of natural resources, excessive remuneration for the world's richest group. But there is also a different sense of excess, the excess of energy in life which is produced beyond what is necessary to maintain the organism and for reproductive purposes, the excess of art, of the erotic, of the carnival (13). The Balinese, like most "traditional" cultures, were not engaged in an economy geared to ever-increasing production. Balinese used to work only a few weeks a year on their island of plenty, to communally plant and harvest the rice. Most of their time was what we now perversely call "free" time, and they gave themselves over to the development of their talents through the gifts of painting, music, dance, and festivals. What are Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony or Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, Picasso's paintings, Alvin Ailey's choreographies, Walt Whitman and Rumi's poetry but celebrations of excess, of abundance, of bounty? Of the excess energies of being human, the excess energies of being alive?

We respond to the abundant calling of the world and of our fellow human beings, not by restricting our energy, by limiting our responses, by being stingy with our knowledge, abilities, talents, attention, but by celebrating the abundance of life through the excess of our presence.

Our attunement to the *ethos* of the *oikos*, to its *logos* and its *nomos*, has shown us the concept of abundance in life and human beings and its co-optation by the rhetoric of economic growth. But by externalizing our abundant sense of life in ever-more rapid and brutal consumption and waste production, we are not celebrating a very progressive side of our nature. Rather, we are projecting our deep animal fears of insecurity, fear, lack, want, and scarcity on a global scale through rampant consumerism. We are shutting out most of that which is glorious, joyous and bountiful about us by interpreting it narrowly as economic production, and by this action threatening our

own survival. We are busying ourselves with the business of replacing the diversity of plants and species and of our own local cultures and modes of being with a global monoculture of greed tethered to an economic bottom line which is as nonsensical as it is perverse.

In the end, though, it is not a question of “us” versus “them”, not a fight to the death between the businessman and the ecologist, between the *nomos* and the *logos* of our *oikos*. The cornucopia envisioned by Simon is also an expression of the unbridled creativity of the human spirit, scientific and technological progress an outcome of our natural curiosity; economic exchange is a cornerstone of the creation of community and communal and cultural identity. Some of the strongest critics of the way corporations destroy our natural and ethical environment, such as Paul Hawken, Joshua Karliner, and David Korten, also agree that it is not business as such which is the problem but rather the widespread externalization of environmental and social costs by companies(14). This externalization of costs means that we are paying far less than the real cost of goods, the balance being made up by exploited workers and the plunder of non-renewable resources. Companies are forced to externalize as many costs as possible by the present financial system in which vast sums of invested money are scouring the globe for the best short-term return possible regardless of consequences.

Despite the rhetoric of material abundance celebrated by our daily dose of advertising, there is in truth nothing abundant about depleting the natural and human resources of a bountiful planet in the fastest way possible. Rather, it is a deep sense of insecurity, fear and scarcity thinking which pushes us to grab as much as possible of the available resources before they run out, and this way of acting, like all pathologies, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is the scarcity thinking of economic theory which posits a world of limited goods and pleasures for which there is unequal competition. In a truly abundant world, resources are husbanded, there is no waste since all by-products are an integral part of the cycle, and the sense of plenty, of bountiful living are an expression of the knowledge that there is always more for those who come after us, that, as a celebration of the gifts we are as human beings, we always give more than we take, out of human generosity, out of our gratitude for being alive.

Endnotes

1. See William Greider, *One World, Ready or Not - The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
2. Norman Myers and Julian L. Simon, *Scarcity or Abundance?: a Debate on the Environment.*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 93. Our use of resources is here defined as “the net primary production (NPP) of the planet, defined as the sum of all photosynthetic production minus the energy required to maintain and support those plants.” Paul Hawken, *The Ecology of Commerce*, (New York, HaperCollins, 1993), p. 22.
4. Michel Serres, *Le Tiers Instruit* (Paris, Francois Bourin, 1991), p. 192.
5. The 358 billionaires in the world in 1994 owned as much wealth as the 2.5 billion people at the bottom of the pile. David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 1995), p. 83.
6. Michel Serres, *op.cit.*, p. 184. Serres also applies this notion of self-restraint to our use of knowledge and our scientific curiosity.
7. Michel Serres, *op.cit.*, p. 192.
9. The integration of environmental costs in economic calculations is a major aim of the ecological movement. For example, Norman Myers, *op.cit.*, p. 97-99. For a perspective from the business community, see Stephan Schmidtheiny et al, *Financing Change: The Financial Community, Eco-efficiency, and Sustainable Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).
10. See the articles in Alan D. Schrift, ed.: *The Logic of the Gift*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).
11. Comments made during the discussion of his paper at the Seventeenth Taniguchi Symposium; see Marco M. Olivetti, "Incarnation of the Ought", in *Acta Intitutionis Philosophiae et Aestheticae*, vol. XVIII, 1997, pp. 155-164.
12. Figure extrapolated from Hawken, *op.cit.*, p. 37.
13. See Alphonso Lingis - *Excesses- Eros and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).
14. Paul Hawken, *op.cit.*; David C. Korten, *op.cit.*; Joshua Karliner, *The Corporate Planet: Ecology and Politics in the Age of Globalization* (San Francisco, Sierra Club Books, 1997), p. 38-9.