

**From Deep Ecology to the Theory of Responsive Cohesion:
A Short Overview of the Development of my Work**

Warwick Fox

Emeritus Professor of Philosophy

University of Central Lancashire

www.warwickfox.com

warwick@warwickfox.com

Privately distributed ms.

(and free for distribution to whoever is interested)

2016

Preamble: This overview is adapted from Chapter 8: 'Working in Plato's Academy' of my book *On Beautiful Days Such as This: A philosopher's search for love, work, place, meaning, and suchlike* (available from Amazon: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Beautiful-Days-Such-This-philosophers/dp/1494482886?ie=UTF8&keywords=warwick%20fox&qid=1416239143&ref_=sr_1_1&sr=8-1). *On Beautiful Days Such as This* is the least philosophical of my books in an academic sense but also the most personal and creative in other ways because it interweaves a wide range of different forms of writing (from prose, original song lyrics, highly or at least wryly amusing and instructive anecdotes/vignettes, and striking quotations to philosophically-oriented musings, a 'live' onstage drama, and a couple of short 'live' philosophical talks for a general audience) into a single, coherent first-person narrative. It is also saturated by a Greek sense of place and incorporates a central, Greek island set love story! So if you'd like to read something different that is about the searches we must all make in life for satisfaction in regard to 'love, work, place, meaning, and suchlike', then you might like to try this book.

What you read below, however, is adapted from the single more overtly philosophical chapter in *On Beautiful Days Such as This* (with the love story elements taken out!) and represents a useful overview of the development of my work for a general readership.

1. Introduction

As a broad generalization, my published research work has moved from focusing on environmental philosophy, and, in particular, on the *deep ecology* approach to environmental philosophy, to the development of what I have labelled General Ethics, and, in particular, my own approach to General Ethics, which I refer to as the *theory of responsive cohesion*.

This document provides a brief outline for a general audience of these ideas as well as the development of my work over time.

I encapsulated the gist of the deep ecology approach – and briefly located it within the context of the other main approaches to environmental philosophy – in a short talk I gave for a general audience on the site of Plato’s Academy (located in the suburbs of Athens) back in 1998. This talk was held as part of the International Society for Greek Philosophy’s Spring Seminar Series for that year. It also represents the last time that I gave a talk on deep ecology for a general audience, as I was already moving on from those ideas by this stage. This is the kind of thing I said:

2. The Deep Ecology Approach to Environmental Philosophy

The ideas presented in this section on deep ecology are developed in much greater detail in my book *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New*

Foundations for Environmentalism (originally published in 1990 by Shambhala Publications in Boston; after selling out in that edition, it was then republished by – and remains readily available from – these publishers: US reprint edition: New York: The State University of New York Press, 1995; UK and European reprint edition: Totnes, Devon: Green Books, 1995).

Deep ecology is one of about nine main approaches to our relationship with the world around us that have been mapped out or advanced by environmental philosophers in recent years. Some of these approaches have attracted quite a lot of attention, not only in philosophical circles but also in the wider environmental movement and beyond. Now, I'm not go into much detail about each of these approaches here, since the primary focus of this short talk will be on deep ecology, but I will begin by categorizing and briefly introducing these approaches so as to give you a sense of the wider environmental philosophical context within which deep ecological ideas have emerged. I will then provide you with a brief outline of the central ideas associated with the deep ecology approach itself.

The first group of approaches that have been mapped out by environmental philosophers consists of those purely human-centred, or *anthropocentric*, approaches that ascribe only a *use value*, *resource value*, or (as philosophers tend to say) *instrumental value* to the nonhuman world. This group of approaches includes those that I have referred to as the *unrestrained exploitation and expansionism approach*, the *resource conservation and development approach*, and the *resource preservation approach*.

The unrestrained exploitation and expansionism approach fails to recognize any planetary limits to material growth and positively sanctions the exploitation of the nonhuman world – conceived of as nothing but 'resources' – at as fast a rate as possible.

The resource conservation and development approach recognizes that there are planetary limits to material growth and so attempts to ‘balance’ the ‘development’ (or exploitation) of ‘resources’ with their conservation, so that we – and future generations of humans – don’t run out of them. This approach is also referred to these days as the *sustainable development approach*.

The resource preservation approach goes further by arguing that we should *preserve* at least some aspects of the nonhuman world – that is, *not* physically transform them, but rather leave them pretty much as they are – because they are of potentially *greater* resource value to us if left like this (e.g., we might preserve a certain area in perpetuity because it is good for tourism).

The second group of approaches consists of those *non-anthropocentric* (or at least not purely human-centred) approaches that would recognize or attribute an *intrinsic value* – and, thus, at least some degree of direct or first-order *moral consideration* – to at least some, and perhaps many, members or aspects of the nonhuman world. This group of approaches includes those we can refer to as the *sentience-based approach* (also known, more widely perhaps, as the *animal welfare approach*), the *life-based approach*, and the *ecological integrity approach*. These approaches argue, respectively, that we should extend the sphere of intrinsic value or moral consideration to all sentient beings (i.e., all entities that are capable of feeling); to all individual living things, whether they are sentient or not (and, thus, to both plants and animals); and to ecological wholes or collectivities such as ecosystems and species. These approaches collectively constitute the mainstream of current environmental ethical discussion.

The third group of approaches consists of the so-called ‘radical ecologies’ of *ecofeminism*, *social ecology*, and *deep ecology*. Ecofeminism emphasizes the

links that exist between the domination of women and the domination of the nonhuman natural world, whereas social ecology emphasizes the links between oppressive social hierarchies in general (whether based on wealth, gender, inherited privilege, party membership, or whatever else) and the domination of the nonhuman natural world. Both approaches suggest that we will not be able to bring the domination of the nonhuman natural world to an end without also dismantling the structures of social domination that, in their view, aid and abet our domination of nature.

Then there is deep ecology. Deep ecology is sympathetic to a range of the general political points that have been made by ecofeminists and social ecologists, but it is nevertheless sceptical of their central thesis that there is some kind of essential or necessary link between certain forms of domination within society on the one hand and the human domination of the nonhuman natural world on the other. For example, we could imagine an eco-fascist regime that was socially oppressive *in order to* ensure that we treated the nonhuman natural world more benignly; conversely, we could imagine a cooperatively-organized society whose members decided, either by explicit agreement or in effect, to exploit the nonhuman natural world around them in order to enrich their society as a whole.

Deep ecology is also wary of the ultimate motives of these other approaches, since both could be construed as employing a concern with the domination of nature to further what are in fact primarily human-centred political agendas. Needless to say, all this has led to some rather 'lively debates' between ecofeminists and social ecologists on the one hand and deep ecologists on the other! But while it is worth noting these debates, I want to focus in the remainder of this short talk on the central ideas that are associated with the deep ecology approach considered in its own right.

The term 'deep ecology' was coined by the influential Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973 and both his term and the ideas with which this

approach is associated have subsequently been taken up and developed by a range of other thinkers, especially in the US and Australia.

So, what are these ideas? In my book *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* I argued that the deep ecology approach is associated with three central ideas. The first is that of *asking deeper questions* about the nature of our relationship with the world around us, and, indeed, it is this idea that gives deep ecology its name. Thus, for example, if an industrial pipeline is polluting a bay, or if a factory smokestack is polluting the surrounding area, one response would be to say, ‘Why don’t we just build a longer pipeline out to sea or build a higher smokestack and thereby remove the problem from the immediate area?’ or ‘Why don’t we invest in cleaner technology so that we can reduce emissions by, say, twenty per cent [but, by implication, otherwise carry on the same]?’ In contrast, the response from advocates of the deep ecology movement is the more radical one of asking deeper questions about the causes and widespread nature of these kinds of problems, and then pressing to address them at this deeper, causal level rather than at the level of responding to their localized symptoms.

The second central idea associated with deep ecology is that we need to replace anthropocentric forms of thinking, valuing, and acting with *ecocentric* (i.e., ecology-centred) forms of thinking, valuing, and acting. Needless to say, the rationale for this shift is held to flow from the process of asking deeper questions about the nature of our relationship with the world around us. A checklist of the kinds of changes that are envisaged here includes the following:

- (i) We should recognize that nonhuman natural entities – including ecological systems in general – are intrinsically valuable (i.e., valuable in their own right) and not simply valuable in so far as they are useful to humans.

(ii) It follows that humans have an obligation to do as much as possible to preserve the richness and diversity of the nonhuman natural world.

(iii) This means working fearlessly, but non-violently (Naess, who was heavily influenced by Gandhi, always emphasizes this), towards substantial decreases in human population, material consumption, and ecologically inappropriate forms of technology.

(iv) This, in turn, means working towards fundamental changes in our economic, technological, and ideological structures as well as in the sources of our psychological satisfactions.

The third central idea associated with deep ecology – and the one that I think is the most distinctive – is that of cultivating a particular kind of internally experienced sense of relationship with the world around us. Naess refers to this form of inner, personal development by the partially intriguing but also partially mystifying term ‘Self-realization!’ He spells ‘Self’ with a capital ‘S’ to indicate that he means the realization of an enlarged and deepened sense of self as opposed to a narrow, egoic, atomistic, or skin-encapsulated sense of self; and he attaches an exclamation mark to the term ‘Self-realization!’ in order to indicate the imperative or normative nature of this term. Thus, for Naess, the term ‘Self-realization!’ effectively means: ‘Strive to realize a wider and deeper sense of Self!’

But how, exactly, are we supposed to realize this wider and deeper sense of Self? For Naess and the other advocates of deep ecology, the answer is, through the process of coming to experience a deep sense of commonality, and thus identification, with the world around us. As Naess puts it: ‘Every living being is connected intimately and from this intimacy follows the capacity for identification, and as its natural consequence, the practice of non-violence.’

Naess's very particular use of the term 'Self-realization!' seems to have caused rather more confusion than enlightenment among some commentators, but it actually cashes out in terms of this much more readily understandable idea of developing 'a wider and deeper sense of identification with the world around us'. For deep ecologists, this ecologically-oriented 'transpersonal' form of self-development ('transpersonal' because it takes us beyond our ordinary, narrowly personal sense of self) represents the most appropriate response to our contemporary understanding that we are, indeed, intimately bound up with the natural order of things. If we were to realize the depth, the intimacy, of our interrelationship with the world around us, then, the deep ecologists argue, we would be led naturally to live in more ecologically virtuous ways.

In an important paper entitled 'Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World', Naess put the matter this way: 'Care flows naturally if the "self" is widened and deepened so that protection of free Nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves ... Just as we do not need morals to make us breathe ... so if your "self" in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care ... You care for yourself without feeling any moral pressure to do it.' Thus, for Naess, a sufficiently deep comprehension of our place in the larger scheme of things ('Every living being is connected intimately') should give rise naturally to the psychological response of wider and deeper identification with the world around us, and this, in turn, should give rise naturally to the personal and political response of defending the integrity of the natural world. On this view, ethical argumentation and moral injunctions become superfluous.

Deep ecology represents an intriguing and appealing approach to many; particularly, perhaps, those who are seeking a meaningful way of 'Being in the World' in a largely post-religious, scientifically-informed and, especially, ecologically-informed context. But it also raises many questions. For

example, at the theoretical level, we want answers to questions such as these: Are there various forms of identification? What are their relative advantages and disadvantages? How can we best develop the most advantageous of these forms of identification? I explored these questions in the final chapter of *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* (the chapter entitled 'Transpersonal Ecology and the Varieties of Identification'), but few other writers have either taken these ideas up or explicitly pursued these questions themselves. It therefore seems to me that deep ecology has been theoretically 'stuck' for some time; its ideas got developed to a certain extent but then the majority of its advocates – even its more philosophically-minded advocates – stopped short of pursuing the further, or 'deeper', questions that these ideas led to.

How, then, does deep ecology fare at the practical level? For example, what proportion of the world's population is actually likely to realize the ecologically-oriented form of self-development that Naess and his colleagues advocate? To be sure, there are those who argue that without some widespread form of consciousness transformation of the kind that Naess envisages – one that requires a deep transformation of our very sense of self – we are headed towards dire, truly dire, ecological consequences. Equally, however, there are those who fully accept the severity of our ecological situation, but argue that there are more practical and persuasive ways of changing people's minds and behaviours than that of seeking wider and deeper identification with the world around us. The philosophers among this latter group are inclined to say, 'Good luck to you if you can achieve the kind of "Self-realization" that the deep ecologists talk about, but we think the way forward lies less in the direction of "consciousness transformation", "nature mysticism", or "ecological romanticism" (ouch!) and more in the direction of developing clearly-reasoned, logically-forceful, ethically-based arguments that will enable us to see quite clearly what general principles we should act on and why we should act on them.'

What's more, these philosophers argue, the deep ecology approach runs into problems when our identifications with the world around us come into conflict. For example, we tend to find it easier to identify with other animals than with more amorphous ecological entities like ecosystems. But suppose we can identify with both. What should we do when the animals with which we identify become invasive and threaten other, native species of animals, or even the integrity of the ecosystem itself (with which we also identify)? And, whatever our answer is here, why should we act in this way? What justifies our answer? For the philosophers who raise these kinds of objections, the need for clearly-reasoned forms of ethical argumentation that can deliver soundly-based principles on which to act is simply inescapable.

* * *

3. Brief Account of the Transition of my work from Deep Ecology to the Theory of Responsive Cohesion

As the concluding section of the above talk suggests, I came to think that although the deep ecology approach was good at inspiring people to begin looking at the world in less anthropocentric terms – or, more positively, in more ecocentric terms – it nevertheless ran into problems of its own at the level of more detailed argumentation for its central ideas. I also came to think that the deep ecology approach ran into difficulties when a more nuanced level of analysis was required in order to address real-world problems in which different kinds of values came into genuine conflict with each other (such as the invasive animals example I gave near the end of my talk). I came to think, in other words, that even if the deep ecologists' emphasis on wider and deeper identification with the world around us was within the capacities of a broad range of people (which, in itself, constituted an interesting question), this approach would, in any case, only get us so far.

But more than this, I became concerned about an even more embracing problem, one that applied not simply to a few individual approaches that were being developed *within* the emerging field of environmental ethics, but rather to the entire field. Specifically, I began to realize that just as human-focused ethicists had until quite recently either ignored or actively denied the (first-order rather than merely indirect) ethical relevance of the nonhuman world in general, so environmental ethicists had, in their concern to escape the anthropocentric legacy of Western ethics, been overwhelmingly concerned with the ethics of the *nonhuman natural environment* (including nonhuman animals and other living things) and, with a few rare exceptions, had themselves ignored the *human-constructed, or built, environment*. In other words, it seemed that so-called 'environmental' ethicists had not yet realized the full implications of their own name.

I thought they very much needed to do this – and quick. Not only is it just a plain old-fashioned fact that the built environment is part of our environment too, but it is obvious that the fate of the 'green bits' of the world has become increasingly bound up with the question of how we design, build, and live in the 'brown bits' of the world. This means that even if your primary concern happens to lie with the 'green bits' of the environment, you had better start thinking about how we design, build, and live in the 'brown bits' of the world too. But above and beyond that, I had also come to think that there was a range of important (first-order) ethical questions that we could and should be asking about the built environment in its own right. It therefore seemed to me that we needed to start thinking about the built environment not only in terms of the kinds of architectural, economic, and aesthetic frameworks we were used to, but in ethical terms too.

In view of this, I ran what is thought to be the first international conference of its kind on the ethics of the built environment (in the Lake District in England in 1999) and published an edited collection entitled *Ethics and the*

Built Environment the following year, which I think also constituted the first full-length book on this theme.

As I continued to reflect on these kinds of concerns and others like them, I began to realize two things. First, it seemed to me that we needed an ethics that encompassed the realms of interhuman ethics, the ethics of the natural environment, *and* the hitherto completely undeveloped ethics of the human-constructed, or built, environment; that we would simply not be able to deal adequately with all the problems we ought to be able to deal with as *ethical* problems until we had that. And by ‘ethical problems’ here I meant problems concerning not just any old values (such as whether we prefer, say, blue to green), but rather problems concerning *the values we should live by*.

Second, we needed this kind of comprehensive ethics to consist not simply in the *summation* of a variety of different approaches to the ethical problems in these different realms, but rather in an *integrated* form. This is because, as anyone who is familiar with both the older, human-focused and the newer, environmental-focused approaches to ethics knows, the various approaches that exist within these fields do not ‘add up’; they simply cannot be ‘glued together’ in their present forms in order to produce some seamless, comprehensive ‘super-theory’ of ethics. Not only are there spectacular conflicts between the claims endorsed by the older, human-focused forms of ethics on the one hand and the newer, environmental-focused approaches to ethics on the other, but there are likewise spectacular conflicts between the approaches promoted within these newer forms of ethics themselves – especially between the more individualistic approaches (such as the various animal welfare approaches) and the more holistic, ecological integrity oriented approaches.

The upshot is that I was, in effect, beginning the search for what I came to label ‘General Ethics’, by which I meant ‘a single, integrated approach to ethics that encompasses the realms of interhuman ethics, the ethics of the

natural environment (including nonhuman animals), and the ethics of the human-constructed environment'. I had begun the search, in other words, for the ethical equivalent of what physicists refer to in their own discipline as a 'Grand Unified Theory' (GUT) or a 'Theory of Everything' (TOE). This was an ambitious undertaking of course, but then, having just the one life, I figured I'd rather pursue what seemed most important to me than seek to add yet another footnote to Plato. Besides, it has always seemed nobler to me to reach for the moon and risk landing flat on your face than not to risk reaching for the moon at all. An undue concern with success is for losers.

After exploring a range of possible avenues of approach, backtracking from multiple dead ends, and repeatedly going 'back to the drawing board' – all of which is part and parcel of any research process – I eventually developed an approach that I thought had both strong rational foundations and clear practical applications. I called this approach the *theory of responsive cohesion* and advanced it in detail in my book *A Theory of General Ethics: Human Relationships, Nature, and the Built Environment*, published by The MIT Press in 2006. (I have also presented more encapsulated or specifically-focused versions of this theory in a range of papers published both before and since then, some of which are available from the 'sample online papers' section of my website: warwick@warwickfox.com)

If I were invited to present the guts of this ethical version of a GUT to a general audience on the site of Plato's Academy today, then I would say something like this:

4. The Theory of Responsive Cohesion

The theory of responsive cohesion represents an unusual approach to ethics in this respect: whereas other ethicists have argued that the basis of value should be sought at the level of some particular kind of *capacity* or *power* that certain entities possess (such as autobiographical self-awareness [i.e., a

temporally-extended sense of self], rationality, sentience, being alive, or having the capacity to maintain some kind of holistic integrity), I have argued that the basis of value should be sought at the more fundamental level of *structure* or *organization*. (I treat these two terms equivalently and use them interchangeably.) More specifically, I have argued that ‘things’ – by which I mean anything at all, really, from physical objects to thoughts to social patterns – can be characterized as being structured or organized in one, or some combination, of three basic ways, and that one of these forms of organization is typically found to be far more valuable than the other two (indeed, the other two are often considered to be disvaluable).

Here are the three basic ways in which things can be structured or organized:

(i) They can be characterized as holding together by virtue of the mutual responsiveness of their elements or salient features. I refer to this form of organization as *responsive cohesion*. Paradigmatic examples of responsive cohesion include everything from (healthy) living things and well-functioning ecosystems in the domain of natural systems; free-flowing, mutually responsive conversations in the domain of interpersonal relations; well-functioning democracies in the domain of political systems; and, in the domain of the material things that humans make, such as the built environment, houses whose constituent features all seem to ‘work together’ while the overall structures they constitute also answer sensitively to their wider contexts.

(ii) Things can be characterized as holding together alright, but as doing so in way that is ‘fixed’ (i.e., made ‘firm, stable, or secure’) in some other, non-mutually responsive way (e.g., because their elements or salient features are highly constrained, locked into place as it were, and do not exemplify much responsiveness at all, or

because the kind of responsiveness they exhibit is primarily of a one-way or top-down kind). I refer to this form of organization as *fixed cohesion*. Paradigmatic examples of fixed cohesion include rocks in the domain of natural systems (i.e., rocks considered as individual entities in their own right as opposed to their place in the workings of ecosystems, which represents another level of consideration altogether); conversations that take a fixed form, such that we almost know how they're going to go (yet again) before we have them, in the domain of interpersonal relations; dictatorships in the domain of political systems; and, in the domain of the built environment, houses that represent examples of a one-size-fits-all approach to housing developments that have been built on land that has been razed and flattened in order to fit the development scheme.

(iii) Finally, things can be characterized as simply failing to hold together – either well or at all. I refer to this form of organization as *discohesion*. (I prefer this term to *chaos* or *anarchy* because these terms can import more specialized meanings from their usages in science and politics, respectively, that I do not want.) Paradigmatic examples of discohesion include natural entities that have become thermodynamically exhausted and worn to dust in the domain of natural systems; conversations in which people are ‘talking past each other’, ‘not connecting’, or ‘driving each other apart’ in the domain of interpersonal relations; lawless anarchy in the domain of political systems; and, in the domain of the built environment, houses that are simply not well constructed in the first place (their roofs leak for a start) while the overall structures they constitute bear no particular relation to their wider contexts – they might as well as have been parachuted in from somewhere else.

Now, as this brief listing of the three basic forms of organization and the kinds of examples they imply might already suggest, I have been arguing –

sometimes, alas, like a fox in the wilderness, at other times in good company – that the most valuable examples of their kind in any general domain of interest are typically found to be those that exhibit the highest degree of responsive cohesion. Think about this for yourself: in your considered judgment, which natural entities, conversations, political systems, or houses do you rate as the most valuable examples of their kind from among the wide range of examples I have already given? Or to put the point more sharply, what kind of world would you most like to live in, one that was characterized by responsive cohesion, fixed cohesion, or dis cohesion?

The idea that responsively cohesive forms of order lie at the basis of our most considered judgments of value is a seemingly simple insight, but it has a range of significant consequences when its implications are followed through. One of the first of these is this: when we consider responsively cohesive structures in general, we quickly come to see that some of these structures – and never any other kinds of structures – are not merely *things*, but *beings*. That is, their observable responsively cohesive structure is such that it supports – via the (functionally) responsively cohesive workings of their nervous systems – an inner, experiential capacity.

If we draw on our own direct insights into the value and disvalue of certain kinds of experiential states and capacities and reflect on the implications of these insights in a consistent (vs. double-standard) way, then we are quickly drawn towards the increasingly familiar ethical conclusions that we should not cause *unnecessary pain and suffering* to sentient beings in general or *the unwanted death (or, indeed, even the diminishment of the autobiographical capacities) of those beings that possess a sense of self-awareness that extends through time*. (We wouldn't want these things to happen to us and certain other kinds of entities are relevantly similar to us in this respect.)

These are separable forms of harm (since it is possible to cause one without

causing the other) and they get at the distinction between *sentient beings per se* (i.e., beings that are merely sentient) and beings that also constitute *selves*. Moreover, the evidence we have seems to suggest that only linguistically-enabled beings (which, on this planet at least, and notwithstanding various popular accounts to the contrary, essentially means humans) possess a sense of self-awareness that extends through time. This means that only linguistically-enabled beings *can* be harmed in terms of being caused the unwanted death or diminishment of their autobiographical capacities. (The detailed evidence and argument to back this up is, of course, a much longer story, but you can follow it up through Chapters 6-8 of my book *A Theory of General Ethics* as well as my more recent paper 'Forms of Harm and our Obligations to Humans and Other Animals', which is freely available from the 'sample online papers' section of my website: www.warwickfox.com)

However, the theory of responsive cohesion goes well beyond simply securing these increasingly familiar negative constraints (these 'shalt nots') in regard to how we should treat both beings that are (merely) sentient and beings that also possess a temporally-extended sense of self. For it places these negative constraints within the more embracing view that we should also be guided by the positive ideal of preserving, regenerating, and creating examples of responsive cohesion wherever we can.

It does more than this, too, because it suggests a *priority ordering principle* in those situations in which there is a genuine clash between different levels of responsive cohesion. Consider: a little reflection on the idea of responsively cohesive structures – or any kind of structure – quickly reveals that every structure exists within a wider context. This means that we can distinguish between the degree of both *individual* and *contextual* responsive cohesion that any particular item of interest possesses. It also means that even if an item of interest has an individually responsively cohesive structure (e.g., a well-made chair; some compelling bars of music), this does

not necessarily mean that it will be responsively cohesive with – that it will fit well with – any given responsively cohesive context (e.g., the otherwise responsively cohesive kitchen in which the chair might go; the otherwise responsively cohesive symphony you have nearly completed).

This means that the relationship between a structure that is responsively cohesive when considered in its own right (such as a chair or some bars of music) and its otherwise responsively cohesive possible context can itself be one of discohesion. What to do? Should we privilege an individual example of responsive cohesion over contextual responsive cohesion by, say, tearing apart the kitchen or the symphony and rebuilding or rewriting as required so that these contexts now answer to the new additions, or should we reject or primarily seek to modify the potential new additions in order to fit their pre-established responsively cohesive contexts?

If responsively cohesive structures are valuable, then the answer is obvious: we should in general give priority to contextual forms of responsive cohesion over individual forms of responsive cohesion. To do otherwise would be to endorse modifying a context's worth of responsive cohesion every time a new responsively cohesive item didn't fit with it. But this would amount to the functional equivalent of discohesion on an ongoing basis: imagine some builders tearing your house apart and rebuilding it every time they ordered something for it that didn't fit; these would truly be the builders from hell. If these builders – or our previous interior kitchen designers or symphonic composers – fail to understand the appropriate 'direction of fit' between contexts and introduced elements, if they 'come at things from the wrong end', then they will fail in their tasks of completing their different kinds of composition; they will fail to leave things 'well arranged' (the word *composition* derives from the Latin *compositus*, meaning 'well arranged').

Now, notwithstanding the tame domestic and musical examples I have employed here for the sake of illustration, this priority ordering of contextual

responsive cohesion over individual examples of responsive cohesion has profound implications. Ultimately, it means that we should give overall priority to sustaining the integrity of the largest responsively cohesive context that bears on our lives. For all practical, earthly purposes, this means respecting the healthy (which is also to say, the responsively cohesive) functioning of the planet's biophysical realm – or 'nature' in general.

Beyond this, we should seek to support and create responsively cohesive forms of organization within the human social realm; including, most obviously, democratic forms of politics that are responsively cohesive with the healthy functioning of the ecological realm and that promote responsively cohesive societies. And beyond this, we should seek to support and create responsively cohesive forms of organization in the human-constructed realm; including, most obviously, a built environment that is responsively cohesive with the ecological realm, the human social realm, and the human-constructed realm *in that ultimate order of priority* (although the idea is always to aim for the preservation, regeneration, and creation of responsive cohesion at all levels).

If we now put the various points I have discussed together, then the 'take-home message', or credo, of the theory of responsive cohesion is basically this:

In living your life – and, thus, being responsive to your own interests, abilities, projects, and relationships – be guided by the positive ideal of preserving, regenerating, and creating examples of responsive cohesion that do not themselves cause (i) the destruction or diminishment of contextual responsive cohesion, or (ii) unnecessary pain and suffering or the unwanted death or diminishment of autobiographical capacities.

In presenting this quick zip through some of the central ideas of the theory

of responsive cohesion, I have, of course, had to leave out many argumentative steps, elaborations, qualifications, and nuances along the way. But I hope I have at least managed to convey the general idea that if we were to take this approach seriously and be guided by it in our personal and political affairs, then we would surely come to live in a world that was, among other things, (i) ecologically more coherent (i.e., responsively cohesive in the biophysical realm); (ii) democratic, respectful of liberty at the individual level, and socially-oriented at the political level (i.e., responsively cohesive in the human social realm, but all this subject to the first, biophysical point); and (iii) in which the human-constructed features of the world were designed so as to be responsively cohesive with the biophysical realm, the needs and desires of its human users, and the pre-existing human-designed contexts of each feature (but, again, in that order of priority insofar as conflicts arise – and bearing in mind that good design can accommodate all three levels of concern so that serious conflicts need not arise in the first place). In short, we would surely come to live in a world that was saner and far more sustainable and inspiring than the one in which we currently live.

* * *

Concluding note: If these theory of responsive cohesion ideas are of interest to you, then, as previously noted, you can explore them in considerably more detail in my book *A Theory of General Ethics: Human Relationships, Nature, and the Built Environment* and through papers available from the ‘sample online papers’ section of my website: warwick@warwickfox.com