

Self-contradictory Volitions

In this short essay, I wish to address an issue that will always be central to any political initiative – and especially to the effort to save (or revive) our natural environment. It is the issue of what persuasive possibilities are available to us and how they can be justified. In addressing this issue, I want to focus on the concept of *will*. My thesis is based on the idea that much of the time people's volitions are not necessarily misguided or "wrong", but merely self-contradictory with respect to their consequences. The hope is that once people are made aware of the hidden reasoning and consequences of their own volitions they will be less inclined to sustain them. The assumption is that most people are reasonable and, therefore, do not explicitly wish to be self-contradictory.

Paramount to any vision of harmony between human activity and that larger nexus of activity which envelopes and nourishes us and that we call "nature" is the question of *will*. Is it possible for the human race to find the will to live in harmony with nature and can we agree to such a goal? For humans live not by instinct, but by will. To not assume this would be fatal to any argument, since we could otherwise make no appeal to anyone to change their behavior at all. It must also be assumed that our ability to communicate our desire for such changes and to persuade others depends on our ability to give universally accessible reasons.

The use of the term *reason* in this context has nothing directly to do with the "reasoning" of the physical sciences. When we give reasons for our volitions, we are not talking about the accordance of our volitions with the laws of nature. Rather we are talking about the relationship between two or more different volitions. We say, for example, that we **want** to go fishing because we **want** to catch fish because we **want** to eat the fish because we **want** to satisfy our hunger... etc. Even a child can understand this chain of reasoning. This may appear to be related in some way to our understanding of the laws of nature, but not entirely. Since there is nothing in nature that says I can only satisfy my hunger by eating fish, there is no causal relationship between hunger and eating fish. This is where volition comes in. On the other hand, the reasoning of our volitions must in some manner correspond and harmonize with the laws of nature or our actions would be said to be irrational. Therefore it is reasonable to say we want to eat fish because our experience tells us that eating fish will satisfy our hunger. I.e. there is a causal relationship between eating fish and satisfying hunger, but not vice versa.

Our actions do, of course, also have consequences beyond our immediate volitions. And our understanding of these consequences is determined by our understanding of the world and the circumstances within which we act. At a deeper level, although we are often not aware of it (and maybe even want to ignore it), there is then a volitional connection between the consequences of one's actions and the volition that leads to them; and this connection must be recognized by any *reasonable* person, once they have grasped (or admitted to) the natural connection of their volition to the broader consequences.

It is my sincere belief that most people are reasonable in this sense. There is too often a tendency to simply attribute ill-intent to people based on the assumption that people are aware of the consequences of their behavior and that they simply do not care. As a result, theories abound about intentions that are the root of all evil. These theories deny and conceal the more complex relationship between volition and the lack of understanding of their consequences that is the much more potent explanation for why people make the decisions they do. We should recognize that it is the lack of understanding rather than the ill-intent that makes the difference in most cases. Although this is certainly not meant to deny that sometimes people do, in fact, harbor ill-intent.

The following is a sample of what I would call *self-contradictory volitions*. Each one is actually a set of volitions that, taken together, are clearly self-contradictory. Each set has 2 parts. The first part shows the volition (and its own narrower reasoning), while the second part shows the broader consequences and how they negate the original volition:

- 1) I want to drive to a place where I can enjoy nature => by doing so I will make a major contribution to destroying all that is natural.
- 2) I want to use cars so that I can get places faster => and the places I need to go on a regular basis get farther and farther away and the highways become more and more congested and backed up making my journey slower.
- 3) I want to buy a house in the suburbs because it is more natural, quiet and peaceful than in the city => thus I will solicit more development that will push the city further into the country and further destroy those quiet and peaceful places I am seeking, replacing them with shopping malls, gas stations, traffic congestion, office buildings, amusement parks, airports, light industry, etc.
- 4) I want to buy more things to keep up with the Jones => and support a materialistic, planned-waste industry that needs to create ever more things that we will need ever more of.
- 5) I want to buy more things because I think that I need them => and support an industry that relies on the illusion of false needs and will therefore convince me I have ever more newly contrived needs.
- 6) I want to travel easily to exotic places => and put pressure on those exotic cultures to develop into the world-wide mono-culture.
- 7) I want the pharmaceutical/chemical industry to develop drugs to cure illness => and promote a biotech industry that is threatening our health and environment with toxic byproducts, under-researched drugs, and failed medical strategies.
- 8) I want to spend my money on CDs or DVDs that give me access to the top performances in the entertainment industry => and not spend my money supporting live performance by local, less-known artists, which limits the continued development of the “top” talent and thus promotes mediocrity and hype and limits my direct experience of art.
- 9) I want the best for my children so I drive them around to all of the extra-curricular events in our mini-van (or equivalent) => and contribute significantly to destroying the environment and, thus, the quality of their future.
- 10) I want more education made available to the masses so that I can advance my position in the competitive, materialistic market => which only ratchets up the competition and reduces the advancement of the individual to sub-ordination in the now predominate hierarchical system of knowledge and expertise (i.e. to a cog in the wheel).
- 11) I want to experience all kinds of exciting things with virtual reality that would otherwise be impractical or impossible => and thus experience nothing real at all.
- 12) I want to build and live in a city that gives me clear protection and distance from the beasts and dangers of the jungle => and create a jungle of humanity and technology in the city which is far more dangerous than any of the “beasts” of nature.
- 13) I want products that will help me to correct the untidyness and uncleanliness of nature (e.g. weed killers, etc.) => which creates industrial wastelands and leads to pollution and toxic contamination.
- 14) I want to control nature and make it my slave => which will involve a constant struggle with nature that makes me into the slave.
- 15) I want to avoid death by circumventing the laws of nature => and never really live at all.

Obviously, the nature of the contradiction in most of these cases is dependent upon the environmentalist perspective of these activities and their consequences. There could obviously be

disagreement over the accuracy of these relationships. The point is, however, that in many cases there is no direct volition to disregard the significance and desirability of nature. In some cases, quite to the contrary, it is the very interest in nature that is the source of the contradiction.

There is also another important point to consider here. It is possible to avoid such contradictions (and still **will** such actions in full knowledge of the consequences) by claiming to be an exception. It is perfectly consistent to maintain that one's own action does not imply a contradiction, since I only wish that **I** perform the action, whereas others should not. If I claim a privilege for myself, then I can still want to perform such actions without penalty of contradiction, since if only I do this, it will not have the same dramatic impact. But, alas, then one is committing a breach of social contract of a different kind. It is important to make this implication clear to everyone. Probably most of us are often unconsciously laying claim to making an exception of one's own actions. This relationship is important, since most people will not explicitly admit to overtly supporting an elitist approach, although many might unwittingly defend their special privileges. Making it painfully obvious that they are in fact invoking this privilege could have a dramatically persuasive effect. It also provides the basis for establishing the political necessity of an environmental principle to restrict political decision-making – along the lines of the non-negotiable right of racial and gender equality. This concept is explored more in the companion thesis: *The Bill of Natural Rights*.

This point will probably become more important as the deterioration of our environment advances. I can easily envision a time, say, when restrictions may need to be placed on driving, in which case only certain privileged classes of people will be allowed that luxury. The same might be applied to the eventual restricted access to the few remaining “wilderness” parks. I can also easily imagine water rationing to the poor, while the upper classes still fill their swimming pools, etc. At what point will we need to stand up and say that such dramatic injustices are not acceptable? Will we finally realize at that point that the entire relationship of human society to nature needs to be re-designed? That the assumption of the necessity of this materialistic, technological economy run amok is misguided?

Confronted with a complete understanding of these volitional relationships, people will be left with only a few options:

- Deny the consequences of one's actions (i.e. refuse to listen to or except the causal explanations that link the consequences to the actions).
- Simply admit to being self-contradictory or unreasonable.
- Claim oneself as an exception and, thus, privileged.
- Correct one's own volitions.

Obviously, it would be difficult for reasonable people to opt for any of the first three of these options. Thus this serves as a guideline for a strategy of persuasion that leaves the integrity of our opponents intact until they put themselves in an unreasonable position. The task is to make people aware not only of the consequences of their actions, but also how those consequences contradict what they – themselves – already actually want. This, I believe, is the only reasonable and politically acceptable approach. Obviously, this line of argument will not always work, but it does clarify the broader task at hand.

To paint all of this in a broader picture, we might contend that most people, when given the chance, do enjoy and get genuine satisfaction from the experience of nature and from being part of nature. Obviously, they usually do not see the connection between their own life-styles and the destruction of the natural environment which eliminates the possibility of that experience and the associated satisfaction. Also, people generally want to be happy, yet pursue it with an

impoverished materialistic strategy that we all know cannot succeed in the end. That same strategy contributes greatly to the elimination of any relationship with nature – a relationship which has the more profound possibility of achieving genuine happiness. And people generally want to be healthy, not realizing that the most essential pre-condition for that is a healthy environment. These and many other connections need to be made clear to everyone. There is at least a reasonable chance that most will understand.

Basically, I see the real problem as one of short-sightedness. People just don't realize how much richer their lives could be – economically, materially and spiritually – if only they were to redirect their will in the right direction. This predicament is undoubtedly due to several factors, of which I see two as key.

First of all, there is a lack of a clear vision for what the alternative might be. For this reason, I am offering my vision of an alternative in the documents entitled: *Framework for a Sustainable Economy* and *Minimal Footprint Ecotecture*. The vision offered there will almost certainly be denounced as utopian. There is nothing, however, that says such a world is not technologically and economically achievable. They are very realistic plans. In fact, I believe that **not** pursuing some very similar strategy will inevitably prove to be **unrealistic**. It is quite obvious that the earth cannot continue indefinitely to sustain the kind of wasteful, perpetual growth economy we currently see as inevitable – especially in view of our failure to resolve the problem of over-population.

Secondly, the whole question is really a matter of will. Do we have and can we have the political will to turn this situation around? And what will it take to get there? If we continue to blindly and apathetically let consumption-oriented advertisement and the dictates of main-stream materialistic culture determine our future, then we are essentially relenting our political will to the myth of a “necessity” that is suspiciously convenient to the privileged minority that is currently in power. I am certainly not saying that it will be easy to circumvent this “necessity”. It will take a lot of will. However, the choice is ours to make. We can either become more reasonable in our relationship to our environment or continue to simply play Russian-roulette with our future and the generations – our descendents – who will live in that future. As my uncle would have said: “Give a damn!”