

The Phases and Future of the Noosphere: Segment 11

David Sloan Wilson: Let's begin with what the noosphere means to you and the influence of Teilhard on your own thinking. I should stress that the other people in this series vary widely in the specific influence of Teilhard, and that the common denominator of this conversation is the concept of the noosphere that he articulated. And that we are now trying to place on a strong scientific foundation. PJ, let's begin with you on your thoughts on the noosphere and the specific influence, if any, of our good old Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

PJ Manney: I actually discovered Teilhard after I started writing (R)evolution and was doing research into who was interested in what I saw as a merging of humans with technology. Not just our use of technology as an externalized force where wheels make us faster and levers make us stronger, et cetera, but as an internalized aspect of our physiology. I discovered that there was people called transhumanists. I'd never heard of them before, and through having discussions with them and trying to understand where their points of view were, they had mentioned Teilhard. So, I started reading, and it was one of those things where for me the intuitions I had finally had a voice and a perspective that I would not have had.

I am not Roman Catholic. I'm not a priest. I'm not a paleontologist, so it was a really wonderful insight into a deep philosophical train of thought. That's why I want to continue exploring it because I think one of the things we will discuss later is the New Mythos, I think that his ideas are such a powerful myth that we can use to tell stories. And I don't use myth in a pejorative sense. I use it in a constructive, how do we tell stories? Where are the underpinnings that touch us at our deepest parts?

DSW: Great. And how about a little more of the noosphere PJ? With or without Teilhard, what does the noosphere mean to you?

PJM: For the noosphere, for me again, it was one of those weird intuitive connections that he actually gave a name to. Ironically, I'd written a scene in (R)evolution before I had really gone in depth into the noosphere, where my character Peter Bernhardt notices the wires above San Francisco. And it's not just the cable car wires, but all the wires and this integration of a world above him that he now has access to because he himself has become connected to the Internet. And to me, the noosphere was something that has been developing for quite some time. It's not a new thing.

I understood its existence before it had a name, and what I love about having a framework that now pre-exists is that we can have more conversations about it. This idea that the merging of human communication and human thought through technological means, we're swimming in it. And I think that there's an interesting aspect to humanity right now in that we are swimming in it. And like fish, we don't know we are in water already.

DSW: Okay. How about you David? Teilhard and the noosphere.

David Brin: One of the things that I specialize in is trying to put things in context, and one of the contexts that Teilhard lived in was the growing awareness that human interconnectivity was going to leverage human knowledge. Roughly about that time, maybe a little bit later after him, there was something that was well known to most science fiction people a generation or two ago, but no longer, J.D. Bernal's very influential essay, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*, which really hit the intelligentsia really hard in the 1920s and was done as an essay. And yet, it was recognized as a great science fiction story because it talked about humans becoming parts of communities that in effect then had the cellular structure of a living cell, especially space colonies.

DSW: Yeah, I just wanted to add that the concept of society as an organism goes all the way back to antiquity. That's an ancient idea. Aristotle, Hobbes, it suffuses religious thought. And I mean it predates individualism by a long way. So, the idea that society needs to in some sense function as an organism in

its own right and in another sense must respect individual rights and freedoms, is something that Teilhard got. He has a whole section on the value of the individual as that pearl beyond price. The idea that whatever we're reaching for with the noosphere really cannot just subsume individuals into some superorganism. It has to be a different kind of superorganism. That I think becomes clear from Teilhard.

And I know that David, you speak for that is as well. So it's not surprising with or without Teilhard and with or without the noosphere, that the idea of the superorganism is going to loom large in science fiction, as it has all the way back to the Greeks and before recorded thought, no doubt. Don't you think? Do you have any comments on that, either one of you?

PJM: I think the problem with thinking about the superorganism is that people have difficulties with frames of context and reference. They think of themselves as an individual. They don't think of themselves as a superorganism, of course which we are. We are superorganisms of superorganisms and as each of these frames expands who you include within the frame of context, I really love using the Eames' Powers of Ten film to visualize this. And yes, it's about exponential change, but really I like to use it as a tool to expand our concept of who's included within the frame and what choices we would make within that frame.

And we are not just individuals and ourselves clusters of superorganisms, but we are in community, we are part of nations, we are part of a globe, we are part of a universe. And at each one of these larger frames, we need to adjust how we see ourselves in it and realize that simultaneously, we're in each of these frames. And I think that's a problem that people have with this notion. Transhumanist critics love to say, "Oh, we're becoming part of the borg." No, we're not. We have always been in community. We have always been in communication. The difference now is that we're in community and communication with ever larger groups of people. So, our circles of empathy have to expand, our circles of communication have to expand.

And we're doing it already, that's the irony. This notion of being part of a superorganism is again, we're the fish in the water. We are part of the superorganism and the idea that we're not is simply a limit of imagination.