

## What Keeps People from Changing their Behavior?

„When do people change their behavior?“ asked Thea Bauriedl in the *Jahrbuch Ökologie* 1996. She was referring to the insight, that even though many people have the knowledge of how they could take environmentally sound steps, the necessary steps to change their behavior are omitted. In our opinion, it isn't realistic to expect the majority of people to change their behavior. Here we would like to explore some ideas about *why* people *don't*.

Thea Bauriedl tried to answer these two interrelated questions from a psychological perspective. She compared the behavior of people who don't change their behavior for the sake of environmental protection, contrary to their own better judgement, to that of „addicts“. Similar to them, they prefer to orient themselves towards short-lived advantages instead maintaining the goals that they actually have set. Instead of finding the reasons for their addiction, alcoholics believe that they can solve their problems by reaching for the bottle. Bauriedl compares this to people who prefer accumulating possessions, power and prestige for themselves instead of „striving with others for real security and contentment“ (Bauriedl 1996). Accumulation of possessions, power and prestige are „drugs“ that „addicts“ take in order to avoid dealing with the dangerous global situation (such as threats to health due to holes in the ozone layer, destruction of the forests, loss of biodiversity etc.), in which they are resulting to their own behaviour and to that of their fellow man - and to avoid the fear, that result from the insight in these dangers. As with all addicts, these people align their entire behavior to acquiring more and more of the drug. When weighing out their subjective „cost-benefit account“, namely that change of behavior in ecological terms has too many personal disadvantages (costs) compared to the individual advantages (benefits) that it would bring.

In result, people do only change their behaviour if the societal and political framework have been changed in so far, that they get a personal reward for their ecologically sound behavior. Bauriedl's theory of power and prestige is not convincing for us. In response, we submit our concept of „Evolutionary Egotism“ to explain human behavior. We thereby demonstrate that neither the re-orientation to other values nor the requested change of structure can be expected to influence human behavior to any notable extent..

### 1. *Power, Possessions and Prestige as Drugs?*

According to Bauriedl's line of thought, the reason that many people are not willing to change their behavior is grounded in two interlinking aspects. Firstly, these people are basically oriented to „irrational“ goals (power, possessions) which is in absolute contradiction to behavior linked to collective values. Secondly, there is no advantage to be seen in assuming ecological behavior in the framework of this orientation.

Let us deal first with the question of the fundamental orientation. We do not contest the fact that many people subjectively consider the accumulation of power, possessions and prestige to be individually more useful as a tool *against* other people than to strive for real security and contentment in community *with* others. However we find it problematic to consider striving for power to be a mere addiction.

We go on the premise that *both* orientations have their intrinsic value. That means, that due to certain principles and for pragmatic reasons, the desired goal of communal security and contentment takes a second place to that of accumulation of possessions, power and prestige.

We think that for the individual it is subjectively *more advantageous* to acquire power and

prestige *against* others than it is to work *with* them. Striving for goals with others requires cooperation, cooperation implies communication costs - time; a higher willingness to reflection, for example. Even though, the struggle for power also has its price, that in certain circumstances correspond to the costs of communication. But cooperation calls additionally for the respective assurance of each party of their willingness to cooperate, an extra condition that the individual usually doesn't have (compare the game theoretical *prisoners dilemma* model.). For that reason, the goals *power*, *possessions* and *prestige*, that don't require cooperation seem more attractive to the individual.

The human strive for power and possessions lies even deeper. They become clear, when „possessions“ are seen as *material economic goods*. They serve, in their original sense, *to secure human existence* (food, clothes, living space). In that, the best guarantee for economic security is the acquisition of power for the individual or a small group.

Given that overall security and contentment aren't considered to have a higher value per se, the decision to strive for possessions, power and prestige therefore can be considered to be rational. They cannot be considered to be mere drugs.

## 2. *Short-sighted Human Beings*

Furthermore the assumption that ecologically acceptable behavior in the framework of the „power/possessions/prestige“- orientation isn't profitable is principally correct.

When we ask why this is, the aspect of *time-related* preference, which Bauriedl doesn't mention, appears to us to be of decisive significance.

Here, let us come back to the term „possession“ but expand it now to include immaterial-abstract values as well. Then such values as health and life can also be seen as a kind of „possession“. Thus today's decisions of how to behave would include the question of possession in the largest sense. The deciding factor is, if one values the relative secure possession of material wealth in the present or near future higher as the prospect of the „possession“ of a healthy life in a possibly distant, uncertain future. When considering this, most people seems to opt for short term secure possessions following to the principle: „a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush!“

The fact that human beings tend to make short-sighted decisions can be explained with their „perception apparatus“ with which they were endowed in the course of evolution. According to representatives of the „Evolutionary Perception Theory“ (Mohr 1987, Wuketits 1984), the human perception apparatus, which still exists rather unchanged until today, developed in the pre-neolithic period. At that time human beings were forced to make quick decisions in order to survive in an environment where one event followed the other in rapid succession. Neither it was necessary to reflect long-term events nor to design behavior accordingly. It would have even been a *disadvantage* for survival. By the way, this phenomena of short-sightedness was also a theme in philosophy, compare the great David Humes „Treatise of Human Nature“, first published in 1739 (David Hume, 1972).

In regard to environmental problems, this limited perception has the following effect: intellectually we are able at least to estimate the grave negative consequences that our behavior will cause in the future. Nonetheless, we don't choose to make the necessary change of behavior which would bring us - compared with the consequences of pollution of the environment - relative small disadvantages (less physical comfort, financial detriments). The disadvantages of the present seems in the perspective to take on larger dimensions than the actual, much larger disadvantages of the future. However this behavior is *rational*, but *short-term rational*. Even though, this behavior is disadvantageous for the entirety of humanity (including all living organisms on earth) and thereby irrational. So, for clarification we have to add: *subjective* short term rational (compare with Vlek, 1996).

### 3. „Free-rider-Syndrom in Reverse“

Even people who have recognized that their behaviour will be harmful for themselves and other in a long term sense, often don't change accordingly. Why?

As already indicated, a specific problem arises when the implementation of a goal requires the cooperation of a large number of individuals: each individual must be sure that everyone else considers reaching the goal to be a priority and is willing to accept the short term disadvantages along the way to reach the goal.

This problem also applies in regard to ecologically sound behavior. It doesn't help much when only a few insightful contemporaries assume ecologically sound behavior. In order for real change to happen, a large number of people need to change their behaviour within a short period. Additionally each individual must be aware of this.

From the perspective of the individual, what we call the „Free-rider-Syndrom in Reverse“ then comes into play.

According to the „Free Rider-behavior“ (compare Olson 1985) or the „Tragedy of the Commons“ (Hardin 1968), there are always individual „parasites“ in communities who want to enjoy advantages (a healthy environment, eg.), but who are not willing to accept the disadvantages (for instance, environmental fees) or to take the responsibility for the costs that the common benefits have. This is only possible for these kind of people because these advantages are common goods from which it is not possible to exclude anyone from their benefits. This behavior is only worth maintaining as long as enough other people behave so that the preservation of the desired goods is secured.

In our case, the situation of the individual is shown in „reverse“. Just because he can *not* expect that most other people will behave in a ecologically sound manner, in terms of short-term rationality it makes no sense for him as - possibly - the only one to accept the present disadvantages of ecologically sound behavior. When closely viewed, it would even objectively be a meaningless act, since the resulting environmental catastrophies would not be halted in the case that only a few individuals change their behavior.

### 4. The Concept of „Evolutionary Egotism“

Let us summarize our present answers to the question of why people don't change their behavior:

The orientation to power and possessions results from the desire to secure one's existence, which is easier to do in competition rather than in cooperation with others. Seen in the light of this orientation, ecologically sound behavior presents short-term subjectively more disadvantages than advantages. Even people who realize the destructiveness of their long-term collective behavior don't change as long as they aren't sure that the majority will comply.

The fundamental characteristics of this orientation is the alignment to individual advantages excluding other people. We have collected the mentioned elements together to a total concept, which we have given the term „Evolutionary Egotism.“ The conceptual-term indicates that we are not dealing with egoistic behavior in a narrow sense, rather with a plurality of elements that - at least at the time of their origins - offered an advantage in survival for the individual.

It is our premise that these behaviors and thinking patterns have an evolutionary explanation. Evolutionary means in this context not only „out of a developmental process“ but serves much more to point to the prehistoric origins of the essential elements. Because the development of human beings goes back to higher primates, we can presume that also in case of the mankind certain survival skills were developed in the process of the biological and social evolution and

became anchored in phylogeny (Eibl-Eibesfeld 1994). So instead of talking about *evolutionary* we could talk about *phylogenetic* egotism, too.

The core of the pursuit of possessing material goods is thereby the human need to secure a basis for survival and propagation by way of accumulating food, clothes and living space. Because these resources are in shortage, the human being competes with his own kind and with other beings. His behavior is *egotistical* in nature, which means that he is aligned to securing his *own* survival. This means that the one who has more access to resources has the best chances of survival by outwitting his competitors. This is possible through gaining power over others, and excluding them from or dividing up goods and resources according to his own judgment. Through cooperation it is also possible to secure resources, but then the resources must be shared, which then again can be a disadvantage for the survival of the individual. For that reason in the course of the development of evolutionary egotism, the orientation to small groups, aggressiveness within the species and the perception of nature as an all powerful enemy that had to be subdued, evolved. These characteristics proved to be useful for the individual (!) survival or at least not harmful not only in the dawn of human history, but also up until a hundred years ago, so they are still the guiding forces today.

Generally summarized, we can say that the behavior of most people can be described as hedonistic, based on considerations of utility, and led by their own rationally conceived self-interests. Because of its *evolutionary* origins, this self-interest is still aligned to short term gains. It is otherwise not at all understandable that human beings can act against their own real future interests, based on their own environmentally detrimental behavior.

Having evolutionary origins is no reason to assume that these characteristics are *unchangeable*, and that everyone is led by them. There are those who are exceptions to this principle, namely idealists and fanatics. In some cases these people are willing to lay down their lives in the service of a higher cause.

As already mentioned, the term egotism that we use should not be limited to egotistic behavior in a narrow sense. Behavior which to all appearances is altruistic can be the result of an egotistical calculation of costs and benefits. The socio-biology calls these forms „reciprocal“ or „nepotistic“ altruism (Voland, 1993). Reciprocal altruism means that the individual can act in an „unselfish“ way if he can assume that those around him will repay him his behaviour in the same way. Nepotistic altruism is the form of unselfish behavior particularly between children and parents, and in more a more diluted form, between relatives. This is the case even when this behavior brings no apparent advantage for the individual. Dawkins explains this as the intention to support one's own genetically related family (Dawkins 1994, similar Wickler/Seibt 1977).

## 5. Perspectives

The decisive question for the future of humankind and also for the earth can be thus stated: Can we overcome this evolutionary egotism? And if possible, how?

The reasons *against* a successful change, in our opinion, lie in the combination of the various components mentioned. We would like to take the example of a structural change of the societal framework that Bauriedl calls for, in order to clarify our point.

Even when Bauriedl calls for a change of the societal (and political) framework she admits that a fundamental shift away from power, possessions and prestige, and towards collective values is an unrealistic demand. We agree with her.

That it is possible in individual cases to act in contradiction to our „phylogenetic imperative“ is apparent in such idealists as Ghandi whose actions all through history up until today is a symbol of altruistic values. However we consider it very improbable that the *broad majority* worldwide would undertake such necessary behavioral changes in the same time frame without

regulatory (forceful) measures - the key term here is Free-riders-behaviour in Reverse! This is not to be expected in view of historical and contemporary human experiences.

Who should then undertake the necessary measures, the change of societal and political structures? We can't expect this to come from the „power-hungry“ and egoistic, profit-oriented people who not only dominate our and lots of others societies numerically, but who also are in control of policy. The few idealists, or more precisely, those who could free themselves from the claws of evolutionary egotism, are hardly strong enough numerically, which is clearly demonstrated in the election results for ecologically aligned parties worldwide. Furthermore, no one can seriously call for an „ecological dictatorship“ due to the all too apparent negative consequences.

In view of all of this, can we take action? Should we resign in face of the obstacles and even commit suicide?

Despite the fact that our viewpoint is clearly even more pessimistic than Thea Bauriedl's, our answer is: No! We, however, have no grounded hope that humankind will make an abrupt positive change.

We suggest here a kind of dualism of thought between the objective recognition that the earth cannot be saved anymore, and a subjective pragmatic approach to try to save it anyway. This dualism in thinking is not only important for scientists, who cannot take a optimistic view of the future without running risks of losing their integrity. Assuming this attitude is also important for the individuals engaged in environmental protection and ecology, if they don't want to capitulate because of the „meaninglessness“ of their actions.

We have on purpose put quotation marks around the word „meaninglessness“, because it is indeed meaningful to take action, even if only to manage one's own individual life in a significant way. A responsible person, in contrast to egoists who think only in short time frames, feels an innate urge to live in tune with nature and to encourage people around him/her to do likewise. It is of eminent importance for the mental health of these people to listen to their inner callings.

Maintaining this spiritual attitude is not at all unusual and difficult, as might seem at first thought, which is demonstrated by the fact that most of us practice it daily. Here we mean the dualism between our complete recognition of the finality of death and our desire nonetheless to live as intensively and fully as possible. We help ourselves out of this dilemma exactly as we do in the case of human-kind-death: we deny it, and continue to strive for happiness in life. In both cases we act - usually unconsciously - according to the philosophy „as if“ that Hans Vaihinger proposed (Vaihinger 1927). We behave „as if“ our days aren't numbered!

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