**Whence comes the human subject?**

**Wiebe Ter Bals**

Abstract

Creating societies that value all members of the Earth community requires changing our economic, political and legal systems. Our ability to make changes is constrained by the dominant philosophical paradigm. To create more harmonious societies we must scrutinise our philosophical paradigm or risk merely doing ‘a bad thing a little bit better’.

Our philosophical paradigms originate in the enlightenment period with its faith in rationality, science and technology, individual autonomy and man’s dominion of nature - values that continue to dominate the political and economic debate today. At its core is a notion of human subjectivity that emphasises man’s autonomy and rationality. It is the autonomous subject of the self-made man. It is the *homo economicus* of rational choice theory seeking to ‘maximise gain’. It is the *homo politicus* of democratic theory engaging in a social contract by casting his vote once every 3 years. Whence comes this human subject? It is postulated with all its rational faculties, its sense of self, of purpose and with an understanding of the world. It appears (*creatio ex nihilo*) as a fully grown adult without a history. Such a subject does not exist. We are not born as *homo rationalis* capable of understanding the world and our place in it but gradually acquire understanding of ourselves and our world as we grow into adults and learn from those around us. This process of ‘becoming human’ creates an intimate relation between an individual and his natural and cultural environment. Human subjectivity is not a-historical and a-social but it is by its very nature inclusive and interdependent.

In order to create societies that live in harmony with the Earth community we must seek to better understand the historical nature of human subjectivity and start to imagine economic, political and legal systems that reflect and express the fundamentally communal and ecological nature of being human.

Speaker Biography

After completing a master’s in Legal Philosophy at the University of Groningen I worked for several years on Indigenous and minority rights issues in Europe and Australia. Since 2010 I have been working on environmental issues and currently hold the position of executive officer at the Sunshine Coast Environment Council.