

## Anthroposophy's Double Gesture: Dan McKanan's *Eco-Alchemy* and Its Meaning for Goethean Science

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Dan McKanan: *Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism*. University of California Press 2018, 306 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0520290068. \$ 29.95.<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

A recent book, *Eco-Alchemy*, by Harvard Professor of Divinity Dan McKanan provides an insightful look into environmentalism and anthroposophy, and into their intrinsic overlap. The topic is an ambitious one, as evidenced by the book's subtitle: *Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism*. A retelling of environmentalism's story would be a daunting project in itself, much less inserting anthroposophy into it.

In this essay, I aim to use McKanan's book as a point of departure to discuss the relationships between the two. In doing so, I'll note some of the book's highlights regarding nodes of intersection and consider some of the points where McKanan has fallen short either in overemphasis or in oversimplification.

One of the most provocative themes in *Eco-Alchemy* is anthroposophy's double gesture of inward, self-reinforcing study in small groups and only for those initiated, balanced with its outward, self-dispersing practices, such as biodynamic farming, used by many worldwide. The concept and image of the "double gesture," *per se*, is introduced only in the last 30 pages of the book: anthroposophy is "[...] characterized by a double gesture, reaching outward to the world through practical initiatives [...] but also looking inward through spiritual research that is accessible only to the initiated." (p. 231) But the idea is actually introduced much earlier and is alluded to elsewhere in the text as opposing "self-reinforcing" and "self-dispersing" tendencies. (p. 24)

Environmentalism and anthroposophy share historical and philosophical elements. McKanan's work is an exposition of both. It is a re-telling of

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<sup>1</sup> All page numbers, unless otherwise specified, refer to this book. Note that the text used was an online version, some page numbers may be approximate.

environmentalism (mainly, its manifestation in the United States), which McKanan states is a social movement that examines natural processes and their interconnections and human's understanding and activism about them. Moreover, it is a story that can be told through an anthroposophical lens, as he suggests here: "For a century, anthroposophy and its initiatives have shaped the evolution of environmentalism, and they will likely continue to do so in the century that lies ahead." (p. 241) In other words, McKanan believes that considering "anthroposophy's multifaceted contributions" is essential to fully understanding environmentalism today. (p. 14) At the same time, he assures us he doesn't want to privilege anthroposophy's role in understanding environmentalism, stating that he could also trace connections with his own religious association, Universalist Unitarianism. Such a qualifier is important in that there are many practicing environmentalists, and certainly academic environmental scholars, that might take issue with the close connections that McKanan makes with anthroposophy in the ensuing 250 pages.

Anthroposophy is well described by what McKanan says is its most oft-cited definition from Rudolf Steiner, namely, "a path of knowledge aiming to guide the spiritual element in the human being to the spiritual in the universe [i.e., anthroposophy's inward gesture]." (*Steiner 1924/25*) McKanan stresses that, "This is not, primarily, a book about Rudolf Steiner. It is a book about environmental initiatives [anthroposophy's outward gesture] inspired by Steiner that accents events that occurred decades after his death." (p. 17) Still, it is very much anthroposophy's story.

There is much from anthroposophy here to offer to environmentalism, especially themes of balance between polarities: "[...] wet and dry, hot and cold, gravity and levity, solidity and fluidity." (p. 35) Such a balance translates into harmony between humans and nature, matter and spirit, and the view that humans should feel fully at home in nature, rather than apart from it – a stance that could seem at odds with humankind's behavior in the Anthropocene (our current human activity-dominated geological epoch).

McKanan describes anthroposophy's search for harmony in reference to the threefold body-soul-spirit (or, the fourfold physical-etheric-astral-"I" or -"ego" human formulation) seeking balance between materialistic Ahrimanic forces and Luciferic ones – unmanageable forces of light and beauty, tempting us "to ungrounded spiritual flight." (p. 13) Such balance is only achieved through spiritual activity, and achieving it is our karmic mandate.

In turn, "environmentalism [is] understood as a social movement that seeks to respect natural systems," and, "[...] ecology [is] understood as a way of knowing that stresses interconnection." (p. 15) McKanan also speaks of ecology as meaning "caring for the interdependent web of life" (p. 184),