VALUES • WARWICK FOX

RESPONSIVE COHESION

Thinking in context.

WE FIND IT very hard to think in a truly contextual way; we tend to think in terms of individuals all the time – especially when it comes to questions of value and moral concerns. So how might we begin to think about questions of value in a contextual way? Here's a suggestion.

I want to outline three basic ways in which things can be organised. First of all things can be either organised or not organised (i.e. disorganised). That's a fundamental distinction we make all the time. But within the category of organisation, or what I prefer to refer to as *cohesion* (which derives from root terms that mean to hold or cling together), we can make another fundamental distinction. Some things tend to hold together, or cohere, in a way that's fixed, rigid, formulaic or stereotypical. But other things tend to hold together, or cohere, by virtue of the mutual *responsiveness* of their constituent elements. A living system is a good example of this kind of *responsively cohesive* entity. This, then, gives us three basic ways in which things can be organised: they can be organised in a way that is fixed; they can be organised in such a way that they hold together by virtue of the mutual interdependencies between (or mutual responsiveness of) their constituent elements; or they can be disorganised. I refer to these three categories as *fixed cohesion*, *responsive cohesion*, and *discohesion*, respectively. Whatever domain of interest or whatever kind of thing we wish to consider, the best examples of each kind will be those that most exemplify the principle of *responsive cohesion*.

In science, for example, if someone has a rigid view about the way the world is organised that is not responsive to new observations that come along, then we consider their view to constitute a bad 'theory' of the world. Rather than even dignify their view by referring to it as a 'theory' of some kind we often just say that their view is a form of 'dogma'. On the other hand, if someone has no theory at all to account for observations, then they're living in what scientists sometimes refer to as a "wilderness of single instances" – they have no way of organising their observations into a coherent account of how the world is, and how it got to be that way. In contrast to these two alternatives we think that the best kinds of theory are those that are responsive to observations in such a way as to provide a coherent account of those observations (i.e. an account that 'hangs together' or coheres rather than one that is internally inconsistent). Thus, the best kinds of scientific theory exemplify this middle category of responsive cohesion, not fixed cohesion or discohesion.

If we now consider ethics, we can see that a similar conclusion applies. Let's take a common enough kind of example that concerns the way in which certain kinds of value – the implementation of which can affect others deeply – can be expressed in the public domain. For example, suppose you go along to see someone in a bureaucracy who is responsible for deciding something that is very important to you – perhaps seeking residency in a foreign country or gaining admission to a particular school or university. It might genuinely be the case that some quite unusual circumstances apply in regard to your situation: that is, you might genuinely be a special case. But the person you see says, "Although I sympathise with your situation, I'm afraid that we can't make an exception to our rules; we can't set a precedent." It might seem crazy for them not to accept your application in your particular situation but still they cling to their 'one size fits all' regulations and reject your request. In these kinds of case we come up against a strict and insensitive code of conduct and we generally think that this kind of approach is a poor one.

On the other hand, if you go to see someone in a bureaucracy who is responsible for deciding something that is very important to you and you find that even when the cases they are presented with are more or less the same they nevertheless make one kind of decision on some occasions and another kind of decision on other occasions – that is, there's no logic to their decisions – then we think that's bad as well. It's just that in this case we think it's bad not because they are enforcing a strictly fixed code but because they are not applying any kind of code at all – there's no cohesion at all to what they are doing: it's all over the place, a mess. In contrast, we think that the best examples of decision-making in regard to others are those in which the decision-maker can provide an account of their decision that is coherent in terms of its responsiveness to the various aspects of the problem situation under consideration. This is the responsively cohesive solution to that problem situation.

Finally, we can see some very stark examples of the distinctions I am drawing here in the domain of politics. The obvious example of fixed cohesion in the domain of politics is a dictatorship, where there's a central fixed organising factor, the dictator, who says that society will be organised
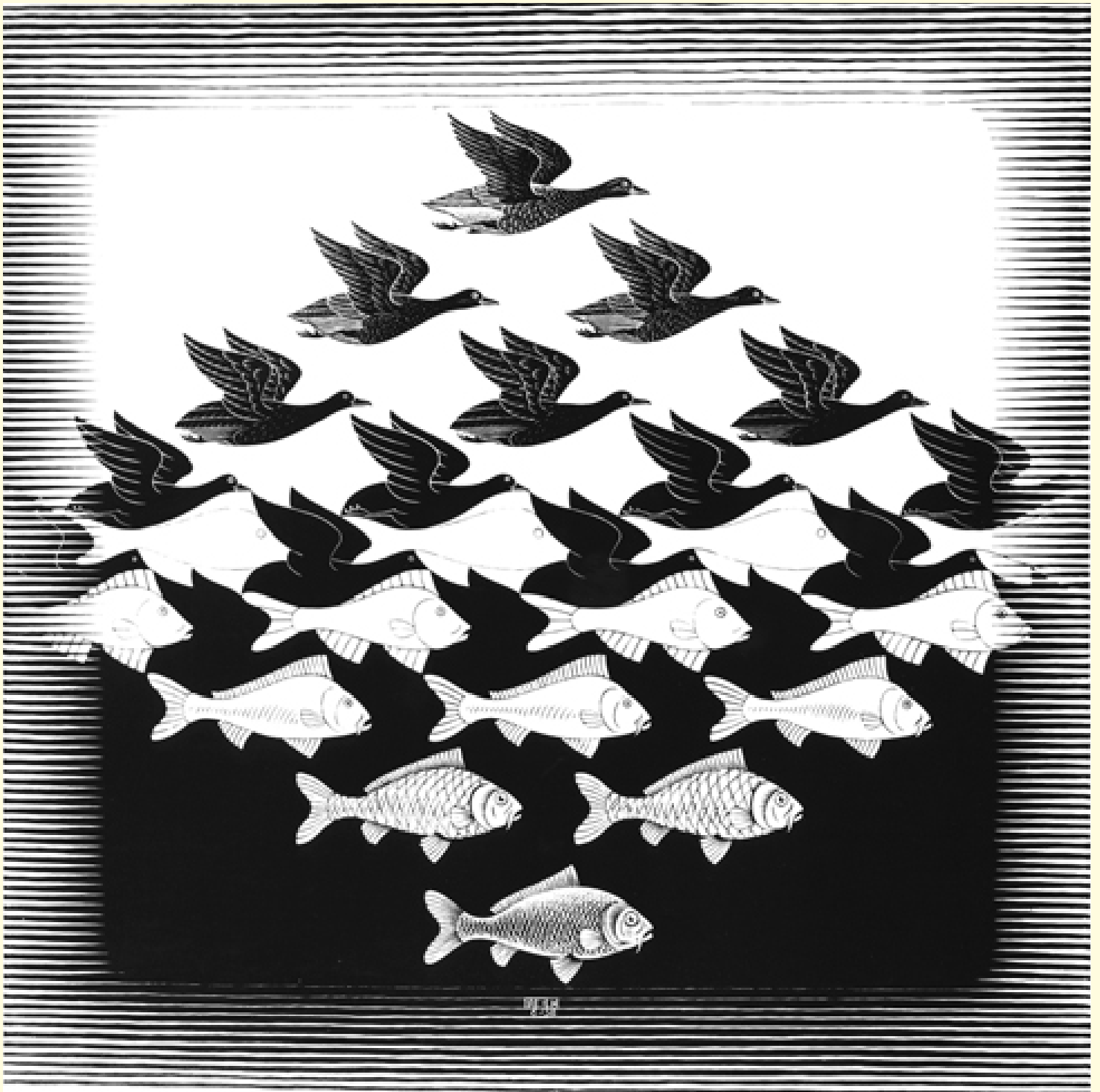
Sky and Water I (1938), *woodcut by M. C. Escher*

this way and this is what you will do. Needless to say, we generally think that this is a bad form of political organisation. On the other hand, we also think that it's bad when there's no governing body at all, when there's no rule of law. In contrast, we think that a good system of politics is one in which the governing body is responsive to the people through free elections, an independent judiciary, a free press, and so on, and the people, in turn, are responsive to the government through the laws of the land. This far preferable example of democracy constitutes a clear example of responsive cohesion in the domain of political organisation, whereas the previous two unpalatable examples of dictatorship and lawlessness constitute examples of fixed cohesion and discohesion, respectively, in the domain of political organisation.

WHAT I'M TRYING to get across very briefly here is the idea that *whatever* domain of interest we wish to consider – whether it be scientific theories, ethics, politics, or others such as psychology, the arts, sports, economics and organisational management – we will find that it is always the example that most exemplifies the relational quality of responsive cohesion that is typically judged to be the best example of its kind. The overall point of this argument is this: if this claim applies in the case of every domain of interest we wish to consider, then it points to the conclusion that the relational

Plane Filling II *(1957), lithograph by M. C. Escher*

quality of responsive cohesion is the *foundational value*; that is, it's the most basic value we can find.

If you are prepared to entertain the idea that perhaps responsive cohesion is the most fundamental value there is, then it follows that we should live by this value, because the best answer to the question "What value or values should we live by?" is not the 42nd most fundamental value we can find or the 57th most fundamental value we can find but rather *the* most fundamental value we can find. (Indeed, it is worth noting here that not only is the relational quality of responsive cohesion, in my view, the most fundamental *value* we can find, but it even underpins the process of *valuing*. This is because the brain itself is organised in a responsively cohesive way – there's no central organising factor or feature in the brain that dictates what all the other parts will do; rather, the brain is constituted by an astonishingly rich network of neurons and neuronal connections that are exquisitely responsive to each other – so even the brain and, thus, consciousness and, thus, the very possibility of valuing are underpinned by this feature of responsive cohesion.)

What would it mean to live by the foundational value of responsive cohesion? Well, one important implication is that it would lead us to think about things much more in terms of how they fit with their contexts. This is an extremely important point. When we think about the idea of responsive cohesion further, we can see that we have to distinguish between *internal* responsive cohesion and *contextual* responsive cohesion. For example, suppose you've just put a tremendous amount of work into composing a beautiful symphony. This symphony has a very responsively cohesive structure: the various elements of the symphony play into and play off each other beautifully. Suppose you then intro-

duce some new bars of music, and although these new bars of music fit together very well when considered on their own, they simply don't fit with the overall structure of the symphony you've composed (they are metaphorically and perhaps also literally off-key relative to the rest of the symphony). This means that although the new bars of music exhibit an *internal* form of responsive cohesion, they don't fit with the *contextual* responsive cohesion that is represented by the overall symphony.

What are you going to do? Well, if you live by the foundational value of responsive cohesion, then the obvious thing to do is to reject or modify the smaller ill-fitting new part because if you tried to turn the whole symphony into something that would fit with this smaller ill-fitting new part, then you'd be undoing lots of responsive cohesion (namely, the rest of the symphony) to fit in with just a small bit of responsive cohesion (namely, the smaller ill-fitting part). Moreover, if you modified the whole to fit with the part every time you introduced some new part that didn't fit (imagine some builders doing this in your house!), then you'd be remaking the whole on an ongoing basis. This would represent the functional equivalent of discohesion rather than responsive cohesion.

The basic message here is that although any *individual* example of responsive cohesion is a *good* thing, the *widest context* in which we can locate this form of organisation is the *best* thing. This means that, on the whole, internal versions of responsive cohesion need to be made to fit with contextual forms of responsive cohesion rather than the other way around. This conclusion brings us to a crucial question: What is the widest context of responsive cohesion that we can think of for all earthly purposes? Well, it's the Earth itself, sometimes referred to these days as Gaia. The largest example of responsive cohesion we can think of for all earthly purposes is the way in which the ecosphere maintains its integrity over time through the mutual responsiveness of its component parts. Thus, if we accept the point that internal versions of responsive cohesion need to be made to fit with contextual forms of responsive cohesion rather than the other way around, then it follows that the internal aspects of our Gaian context, including our social, political and economic arrangements as well as the human-created built environment, should be made responsive to that context, rather than the other way around.

Now, some of what I've said has been fairly abstract but I've tried to point you in the direction of a fundamental and deep idea, the kind of idea we're going to need to adopt as a society if we are to get beyond individualistic thinking and begin to think in terms of contexts and the value of certain kinds of context relative to others. My own view is that we will not as a society be sufficiently motivated to organise how we live and what we make in contextually sensitive ways (including, but not only, ecologically sensitive ways) until we come to see that the relational quality of responsive cohesion actually represents the deepest value there is. If we collectively come to see this, then we will find ourselves far more motivated to engage in the kind of *context saturated thinking* that the adoption of this foundational value brings in its wake and that is clearly crucial to the future of life on Earth – both human and non-human.

If there is a 'take-home message' of the theory of responsive cohesion, it is this: in being responsive to your own goals and desires – that is, in living *your* life – do what you reasonably can to *preserve* examples of the relational quality of responsive cohesion where you find them, *regenerate or create* examples of it in and through your chosen undertakings, *reflect and reinforce* it in your judgements and ways of proceeding, and so on.

This credo needs to be understood, of course, in terms of the ultimate priority of contextual forms of responsive cohesion over internal forms of responsive cohesion. But note here that "ultimate priority" really does mean "priority in the final instance"; I am not suggesting that contextual forms of responsive cohesion should ride roughshod over internal forms of responsive cohesion. Thus, as I said to a conference I recently addressed of architects, designers, builders and planners, "When you make material things, make them

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so that they exemplify both contextual and internal responsive cohesion. If tough choices have to be made between these two forms of responsive cohesion, then give priority to contextual responsive cohesion over internal responsive cohesion. And if tough choices have to be made between contextual forms of responsive cohesion themselves, then give priority to contextual responsive cohesion with the natural realm over the human social realm (since the natural realm provides the wider, generative and sustaining context of the human social realm), and the human social realm over the human-constructed realm (since the human social realm provides the wider, generative and sustaining context of the human-constructed realm). But on no account engage in prioritising things in any of these ways unless you are confronted with a genuinely forced choice. The thing to aim for is responsive cohesion at all levels. To settle for less is actually to settle for a failure of design."

If sufficient people and sufficient powers-that-be took the framework offered by the theory of responsive cohesion seriously, then we would live in a world that was, among other things, more ecologically coherent and democratic, and in which human institutions and the human-constructed features of the world were designed so as to be responsively cohesive with the natural world and the needs and desires of people and the pre-existing human-designed contexts of each feature (but, again, in that order of priority insofar as conflicts arise – and bearing in mind that good design can accommodate all three levels of concern so that serious conflicts need not arise in the first place). A world that was more responsively cohesive along these lines would, according to the theory of responsive cohesion, be a better world because it would exemplify the foundational value of responsive cohesion far more than our world presently does. ✿

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