

In Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson, eds., *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*. San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2010. Pages 70-74.

A Hinge Point of History

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We live at a change of epochs. We are witness to the end of nature as we enter a new era: the Anthropocene.¹ From this point on, culture more than nature is the principal determinant of Earth's future. We are passing into a century when this will be increasingly obvious, and this fact puts us indeed at a hinge point of history.

Especially in the West, we have lived with a deep-seated belief that life will get better, that one should hope for abundance and work toward obtaining it. We have even built that belief into our concept of human rights: a right to self-development, to self-realization. Such an egalitarian ethic scales everybody up and, at the same time, drives an unsustainable world. When everybody seeks their own good, there is escalating consumption. When everybody seeks everybody else's good, there is, again, escalating consumption. When we have technological powers to produce these goods, we enter the Anthropocene era,

For some this is cause for congratulation, the fulfillment of our destiny as a species. In a *Scientific American* special issue from the late 1980s, *Managing Planet Earth*, the editors claim that the two

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1. Paul J. Crutzen, "The Anthropocene," in *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*, ed. Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Draft (Berlin: Springer, 2006).

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central questions today are "What kind of planet do we want?" and "What kind of planet can we get?"

For others this is cause for concern. We worried throughout much of the past century that humans would destroy themselves in inter-human conflict. That fear—at least of global nuclear disaster—has subsided somewhat, only to be replaced by a new one. We wonder, will these Earth managers produce a sustainable development or a sustainable biosphere? The worry for the next century is that if our present course is uncorrected, humans may ruin their planet and themselves along with it.

There are paradoxes and challenges that confront and confound us in this new era. Although we congratulate ourselves on our powers, perhaps humans are not well equipped to manage the sorts of global-level problems we face. The classical institutions—family, village, tribe, nation, agriculture, industry, law, medicine, even school and church—have shorter horizons. Far-off descendants and distant races do not have much "biological hold" on us. Across the millennia of human evolution, little in our behavior affected those remote from us in time or in space, and natural selection shaped only our conduct toward those who were closer. Global threats, however, require us to act in massive concert—of which we may be incapable. If so, humans may bear within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. To put it more bluntly, more scientifically: our genes once enabled our adaptive fit but may in the next millennium prove maladaptive and destroy us.

This wonderland Earth is a planet with promise. But if we are to realize the abundant life for all time, both policy and ethics must enlarge the scope of concern. Humans are attracted to appeals to a better life, to a higher quality of life; if environmental ethics can persuade large numbers of persons that a sustainable biosphere takes priority over sustainable development, that an environment with biodiversity and wildness is a better world to live in than one without these, then some progress is possible. We can still use an appeal to an even more enlightened self-interest, or, perhaps better, to a more inclusive and

2. William C. Clark, "Managing Planet Earth," *Scientific American* 261, no. 3 (September 1989), 46-54.

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comprehensive concept of human welfare. That will get us clear air, clean water, soil conservation, national parks, recreational wildlife reserves, and bird sanctuaries. Environmental ethics cannot succeed without these things. This is not simply pragmatic; it is quite true.

We have seen this moral transcendence before. The European Union has transcended national interests with surprising consensus about environmental issues. Kofi Annan, former secretary-general of the United Nations, praised the Montreal Protocol, with its five revisions, widely adopted (by 191 nations) and implemented, as the most successful international agreement yet. Every developed nation except the United States and Australia signed the Kyoto Protocol. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) has been signed by 112 nations. There are more than 150 international agreements (conventions, treaties, protocols, etc.) registered with the United Nations that deal directly with environmental problems.

Humans are a paradox on Earth, both a part of nature and apart from nature. Humans evolved out of nature. But in important senses, they did just that; they evolved into culture, contrasted with nature. Humans are nurtured into an inherited culture. This cultural genius makes possible the deliberate and cumulative, and therefore the extensive, technological rebuilding of nature. Rather than being themselves morphologically and genetically reshaped to fit their changing environments, humans reshape those environments.

Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson explain that humans have a "dual inheritance system"—genetic nature and cultural nurture. Boyd and Peterson find that the existence of human culture is a deep evolutionary mystery on a par with the origins of life itself: "Human societies are a spectacular anomaly in the animal world."³ The human transition into culture is exponential, nonlinear, reaching extraordinary epistemic powers. To borrow a term from the geologists, humans have crossed an unconformity. In that sense, it is true that Earth is now in a postevolutionary phase.

3. Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), and Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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But at this hinge point of history, isn't it still an open question whether we want the future of Earth to turn entirely on humans? Perhaps we are postevolutionary, but do we wish to be postecological? What kind of planet do we want? What kind of planet can we get? We also ought to ask: What kind of planet do we have? What kind of planet ought we to want? We may be entering the Anthropocene era, but we ought to choose not to enter the Anthropocentric era—and the latter is not a necessary implication of the former.

Nature as it once was, nature as an end in itself, is no longer the whole story. Nature as contrasted with culture is not the whole story either. An environmental ethic is not just about wildlands, but also about humans at home on their landscapes, humans in their culture residing also in nature. This will involve resource use, sustainable development, managed landscapes, and the urban and rural environments, of course. Further, it can and ought to involve, now and in the future, the thought of nature as an end in itself, a sustainable biosphere worthy of care and respect for its own sake.

We already see examples of just such a moral gesture. In the defense of life on Earth since time immemorial, organisms have set up territorial boundaries. If they do not defend their places and their resources, they cannot survive and reproduce. But now there is something new, never seen on Earth throughout its billions of years of evolving species. Humans have begun to set conservation of the biodiversity on Earth as a moral and social goal. We set up boundaries (in biodiversity reserves, wilderness areas, national parks), and we set ourselves apart in this setting. Roger DiSilvestro exclaims: "This is something truly new under the sun, and every protected wild place is a monument to humanity's uniqueness.... We not only *can* do, but we can choose *not to do*. Thus, what is unique about the boundaries we place around parks and other sanctuaries is that these boundaries are created to protect a region from our own actions. . . . No longer can we think of ourselves as masters of the natural world. Rather, we are partners with it."⁴

We need to become wiser than Socrates. Certainly "the unexam-

4. Roger L. DiSilvestro, *Reclaiming the Last Wild Places: A New Agenda for Biodiversity* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993), xiv-xv.

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ined life is not worth living," and certainly we should strive to "know thyself." And while the classic search in philosophy has been to figure out what it means to be human, Socrates was sometimes wrong. In his search for the good life, Socrates loved Athens, which is well enough. After all, a human is, as Aristotle put it, a "political animal." We live in towns (Greek: *polis*), in social communities, and we cannot know who we are without an examination of the cultures that shape our humanity. But Socrates avoided nature, thinking it profitless: "You see, I am fond of learning. Now the country places and trees won't teach me anything, and the people in the city do." We need to become more inclusive than Socrates: life in an unexamined world is not worth living either.

This is the answer to the would-be planetary managers' questions about what kind of life we want on what kind of planet: *We do not want a denatured life on a denatured planet. That would rupture history, that would dehumanize us all, that would deny the future their abundant life.*