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Environmental Ethic(s)**

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Beyond Environmental Morality: Towards a Viable Environmental Ethic(s)

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Abstract: Environmental ethics assumes that humans are, at the core, environmentally 'bad' because we are currently destroying nature. This operative assumption of environmental ethics as a field is what I want to term contemporary environmental morality, wherein humans and their industry, technology, and economy are considered to be 'evil' in contrast to ecosystems, wilderness, or nature, which are valued as 'good.' More pointedly, environmental ethics as it stands presupposes that there is an entity called 'nature' that we humans are differentiated from and have an obligation towards as outside actors. This is what I want to call environmental dualism, which holds humans as separate from, rather than a part of, nature; and, in keeping with contemporary environmental morality, as a force that is destroying this entity called 'nature.' Both the environmental dualism and the contemporary environmental morality that characterize environmental ethical thought are inaccurate for two reasons. Firstly, humans are a part of nature – we are organic beings and all of our actions occur within a larger ecological framework. Secondly, though humans could accurately be described as environmentally 'bad' historically, our species can become a force for environmental 'good,' both industrially with respect to manufacturing processes and developmentally with respect to land use. If we reframe the basic story such that we humans, as an integral part of nature, can contribute positively as vital, productive parts of the whole, new ideas and possibilities emerge. Humans do not have to be detrimental to the environment; we are not fundamentally flawed in this respect despite what environmental moralists might say. By going beyond the environmental morality and dualism exemplified by modern environmental ethics as a field, we as ethical thinkers and activists can begin to be effective in our efforts to advocate for a more ecologically adapted society with environmentally conscious lifestyles.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, A Sand County Almanac, Morality, Land Ethic, Cradle-to-Cradle, Conservation Philosophy, Environmental Philosophy, Aldo Leopold, J. Baird Callicott, William McDonough, Michael Braungart, Wilderness, Conservation/Preservation, Nietzsche

“No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” –Albert Einstein

“But have you ever asked yourselves enough how dearly the erection of every ideal on earth has exacted its payment?” – Friedrich Nietzsche (*Genealogy of Morality*, Second Treatise)

I. Overture

THROUGH MY EXPERIENCES as an environmental activist and thinker, I have been concerned that environmental ethics as a field in philosophy and as a strand of contemporary thought has been dominated by a dismally moralizing discourse. I contend that this moralizing discourse actually hinders environmentalist goals, both conceptually and practically.

Modern Western environmental ethics assumes that humans are, at the core, environmentally ‘bad’ because we are currently destroying nature. This operative assumption of environmental ethics as a field hitherto is what I want to term *contemporary environmental morality*, wherein humans and their industry, technology, and economy are considered to be ‘evil’ in contrast to ecosystems, wilderness, or nature, which are valued as ‘good.’ Environmental ethics calls us to renounce our anthropocentric worldview and modify our behavior to treat the environment in a way that is less ‘bad.’

More pointedly, environmental ethics presupposes that there is an entity called ‘nature’ that we humans are differentiated from and have an obligation towards as outside actors. This is what I want to call *environmental dualism*, which holds humans as separate from, rather than a part of, nature; and, in keeping with the aforementioned contemporary environmental morality, as a force that is destroying this entity called ‘nature.’

Both environmental ethicist and activist worldviews operate on a narrative that can be roughly summarized as follows: ‘nature,’ which we are despoiling, was at one point, prior to humans, a pristine wilderness where paradisiacal conditions reigned, a view critics refer to as the Arcadian myth. The story goes that this prelapsarian state in which humans existed harmoniously with nature was thrown out of balance, firstly with the advent of agriculture and the resultant rise of civilizations. Later, the industrial revolution and the consumer capitalist economy served to exacerbate our situation, the unfettered greed and waste of which are currently imperiling all life support systems on planet Earth. If only we would begin to help the environment by reining in our species’ destructive tendencies, we could begin to reset the original balance. I hold that such views are textbook cases of the contemporary environmental morality and environmental dualism that are currently endemic to most members of our species, not excluding environmental ethicists and activists.

It is my view that both the environmental dualism and the contemporary environmental morality that characterize modern environmental ethical thought are inaccurate for two reasons. Firstly, humans are a part of nature – we are organic beings, all of our actions occur within a larger ecological framework, and we reside within these ecosystems. Our creations are natural – houses and factory dormitories are no less natural products than are birds’ nests and beehives. Our economy, to the extent that it stems from us as natural beings, is natural as well. Though our human creations and economies may operate by methods contra to life broadly speaking and compromise our fellow natural beings and their habitats in the process, these are historical contingencies that can, and I would argue *must*, be changed.

Secondly, though humans could accurately be described as environmentally ‘bad’ historically, our species can become a force for environmental ‘good,’ both industrially with respect to manufacturing processes and developmentally with respect to land use. I will explore in further detail what being environmentally ‘good’ would practically mean in Section III of this essay. Rather than seeking to be less bad or have ‘zero impact,’ we as a species can, and again I would argue *must*, alter our industries and patterns of development to become environmentally integrated and have a *positive* i.e. ecologically beneficial impact on the environment.

Both contemporary environmental morality and environmental dualism result from contingent historical factors, with the former arising as a reaction to the unintentionally destructive development of the industrial revolution, and the latter reflecting the persistence of anthropocentric worldviews predominantly anchored in ancient European culture (or lazy contemporary colloquial dualisms of ‘nature’ vs. ‘culture’). However, there is no reason that these

conditions will or even can remain the same. Modern environmental ethics, therefore, to the extent that one or both of these faulty attributes characterize it, is also contained within these historical realities and confined to that particular framework.

What, then, does it mean to have a systematized ethics cemented within these contingent historical realities? How will we transcend our heretofore-detrimental environmental beliefs and behaviors while keeping our ethics in that same historical context and resulting self-view as a species? Moreover, why would we try to solidify unchanging, universal environmental ethical theories within a dynamic, evolving, complex environment? By applying modern moral philosophy to environmental issues, we inherit a problem of static environmental ethics within dynamic cultural and environmental frameworks.

What is wrong with environmental ethics? Who could impugn such an ostensibly noble thing? I hold that modern environmental ethics is *foremost among the forces that keep our species from evolving* to be more ecologically adapted or ‘environmentally friendly.’ The dialectic is approximately this: unwittingly, in fighting the actions and institutions that are degrading the environment, environmental activists, employing our modern environmental ethics, merely oppose the consciousness that created environmental problems to begin with – namely, that humans are separate from ‘nature’ and can use it however they wish. Activist remedies, therefore, will merely react negatively to this state of affairs; thus, we get the picture that humans and their economy are evil, nature and its economy is good, and that if we do not completely leave nature alone then we should at least inflict as little damage as possible. We inherit a portrait of human self-hatred where the best possible world, ecologically speaking, is one devoid of the human species entirely. With such a flawed guiding vision, it is little wonder that the environmental movement has yet to gain sweeping power and reforms globally.

It is my view that morality is a failed vehicle for handling environmental problems. For example, though we know that our burning of fossil fuels is environmentally destructive and bad for our health, we are forced to do so anyway because our current industrial system has evolved upon this premise. Moralize as much as we like, finger wagging and admonishment will not change the basis of our economy – we still drive our cars, use our coal-fired power, and rely on extractive industries. Decrying such activities as evil merely opposes these practices and contributes nothing to forward a fundamentally different alternative, neither intellectually nor practically.

Reframing the basic story and approach such that we humans, as an integral part of nature, can contribute positively as vital, productive parts of the whole would represent an explosion of the superstructure of what is presently considered possible. Once we transcend environmental dualism and contemporary environmental morality, all manner of ideas and possibilities emerge, as if on the dawn of a new day. Humans do not have to be detrimental to the environment; we are not fundamentally flawed in this respect despite what environmental moralists might say. By going beyond the contemporary environmental morality and environmental dualism exemplified by modern environmental ethics as a field, we as ethical thinkers and activists can begin to be effective in our efforts to advocate for a more ecologically adapted society with environmentally conscious lifestyles.

Given the failure of morality as an approach for going beyond our problematic environmental status quo, we turn our attention to new questions: what would the content of a viable environmental ethic be and how would its narrative sound? I hope to show that it is possible

to go beyond environmental morality to change the content and narrative of environmental ethics such that it can effectively guide environmental praxis.

II. A brief look at the Evolution of (Modern , Western) Environmental Ethics

I will begin by substantiating some of the claims made in the introduction by way of a brief analysis of some of the dominant strands of environmental ethical thought. At the outset, I should note that this is a sketch of ethical work by contemporary environmental philosophers in America; there are other traditions of environmental ethics worldwide of older provenance, which are not the focus of this essay.

Firstly, what is environmental ethics? According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Environmental ethics is the discipline that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its nonhuman contents.”¹ The definition discusses a discipline that is relatively nascent. Environmental ethics arose out of 1970’s environmental crisis consciousness, a time when concerns about overpopulation, the phenomenon of ‘global cooling,’ and a maelstrom of other environmental issues spawned the first Earth Day in 1970. Noting and bearing in mind this context is crucial: the *raison d’être* and goal of environmental ethics as a field was to avert the specter of environmental disaster. This context colors the narrative employed by the seminal environmental ethical writers, a narrative that presupposes both environmental dualism and contemporary environmental morality, and which continues to color the discourse in the field and on the streets today. Even the definition of the discipline seems to hold humans as separate from the environment. The value and moral status of the environment being open questions within the definition implies an oppositional historical way of viewing and relating to the environment: whereas it was once acceptable to instrumentally value nature as an object without moral status, now, thanks to environmental ethics, we may question and debate that historical status quo.

Yet, the historical status quo of the environment, both with respect to nature being separate from humans and with respect to humans opposing nature, constrains the environmental ethical debates and narratives to that historical context. The idea that an environmental ethic aims to avoid destruction assumes that the default behavior of the species who enlists such an ethic is environmentally destructive, which is exactly the type of assumption that I want to impugn. Though such a characterization is historically accurate, it is contingent; this state of affairs could be otherwise, as I will sketch in Section III. My argument relies on the open possibility of a different human relationship to the environment, one that is not fundamentally adversarial. A second industrial revolution, for example, could alter industry such that it is *de facto* beneficial to the environment, being ecologically integrated by design.

As it stands, environmental ethics seeks to mitigate damage or prohibit destruction of the environment. For prominent environmental ethicist J. Baird Callicott, we need an environmental ethic, or else we are doomed: “The point is this: Unless we evolve a non-anthropocentric environmental ethic, *Homo sapiens* may not be around for very much longer” (EI p. 206). This is a prime example of contemporary environmental morality. The assumption is clear –unless we rein in our destructive behavior by employing an environmental ethic, we

¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental/>

will vanquish ourselves along with much of the biotic community that we have decimated. ‘Stop doing harm’ hardly seems to be satisfactory content for an environmental ethic, nor an example of effective discourse to inspire people to adopt such an ethic. Yet, it is the starting point and tacit narrative that engendered the discipline of environmental ethics.

According to Callicott, both environmental ethics and animal rights develop moral philosophies that ground ethical theories, which in turn imply practical precepts – in the methodological tradition of Western philosophy (EP p. 6). In Callicott’s view, “Singer, Regan, Goodpaster, and Taylor all provide variations on a common theoretical theme that could be called the standard paradigm of traditional moral philosophy,” which “identifies and justifies a property or characteristic that entitles the possessor to moral considerability” (EP p. 10). Biocentrism stretches this familiar pattern of moral reasoning to its limit because it seems absurd to argue that bacteria and charismatic megafauna are of equal inherent value (EP p. 10). We see that morality is a limited way to go about conceptualizing environmental concerns.

III. Elaboration on how exactly we Humans can be Environmentally ‘good’

As mentioned in the Overture, I think that our species can actually be environmentally ‘good’ in two ways, both industrially with respect to manufacturing processes and developmentally with respect to land use. Accepting this possibility entails dire consequences for the contemporary environmental morality that has thus far dominated the environmental ethical discourse. With this alternative idea as a starting point, we are freed to employ an entirely different environmental ethical narrative, one that opens new perspectives on long-standing impasses and permits creative thinking for alternative solutions rather than solutions that are entrenched in the past and sanctimoniously seek to curb global destruction. However, this is a view that certainly requires a bit of explanation. For these ideas I am indebted to William McDonough and Michael Braungart, authors of the 2002 groundbreaking book on ecological design, *Cradle-to-Cradle*. The philosophical significance of this book cannot be understated.

McDonough and Braungart begin their book by discussing the possibility of a new industrial revolution. They address contemporary environmental morality:

We are accustomed to thinking of industry and the environment as being at odds with each other, because conventional methods of extraction, manufacture, and disposal are destructive to the natural world. Environmentalists often characterize business as bad and industry itself (and the growth it demands) as inevitably destructive (C2C p. 6-7, emphasis mine).

We see that the operative contemporary environmental morality we currently hold is merely a product of the way that industrialization has happened to evolve. This historical contingency has led to a dichotomy/dualism that is a bane for both environmental activists and industry. The message activists broadcast to the public in order to become more environmentally friendly is cast in solely negative terms – stop doing X, do less of Y, be less environmentally ‘bad.’

Such messages are problematic in McDonough and Braungart’s eyes for two reasons. Firstly, these messages are based on a historical contingency that environmentalists are

seeking to change – namely, that of industrialization as it is. However, in trying to change this, the message is merely cast in opposition to that reality from within its very paradigm. We quickly come to a moot point, because the only way for us to be environmentally good is to restrict the bad *modus operandi* – but in so doing, we keep the very same systems in place, merely with restraints and regulations. Thus, we perpetuate the fundamentally destructive processes and systems, but allow their operation to extend over a longer period of time as we make them more efficient and less destructive. As the authors write, “being ‘less bad’ is no good” (C2C p. 45). Secondly, the negative messages are not inspiring – making people feel bad is not an effective way to inspire creative, positive change.

For McDonough and Braungart, destructive processes of industrialization dominate our current relationship to the environment. However, there is nothing morally bad or intentionally pernicious about the way that things are now:

...just as industrialists, engineers, designers, and developers of the past did not intend to bring about such devastating effects, those who perpetuate these paradigms today surely do not intend to damage the world. The waste, pollution, crude products, and other negative effects that we have described are not the result of corporations doing something morally wrong. They are the consequence of outdated and unintelligent design (C2C p. 42-43).

Thus, moralization as a response to the industrial and environmental status quo is a nonsensical category mistake. The industrial revolution was a process of evolution like any other – it took place without a teleology or plan; lots of things just happened and developed which brought about more happenings and developments, a direction that led to the way things are presently. If we take a step back and look at the way things are now, we can recognize the deleterious patterns, but this is only a luxury we have in hindsight. Our current systems and approaches are not immoral, but ecologically uninformed. At this point in our cultural evolution, we can choose a conscious, intentional, intelligent approach to our human ecosystems that includes the knowledge we now have as a result of doing things in a way that damages human *and* ecological vitality. However, such a choice does not have to and seemingly cannot arise from simply chiding the ways of old.

McDonough and Braungart offer quite a different vision for industry, and by extension environmentalism:

We see a world of abundance, not limits. In the midst of a great deal of talk about reducing the human ecological footprint, we offer a different vision. What if humans designed products and systems that celebrate an abundance of human creativity, culture, and productivity? That are so intelligent and safe, our species leaves an ecological footprint to delight in, not lament? (C2C, p. 15-16)

The rest of the book goes on to elaborate the ways in which we can evolve our industrial processes to fit in with these outlooks. Unfortunately, modern environmental ethics seems to be unaware of the almost Nietzschean shift in environmental thinking represented by McDonough and Braungart’s paradigm. The authors turn contemporary environmental morality on its head – what was ‘good’ (efficiency, doing-less-bad) becomes bad (or inef-

fective), and what was ‘evil’ (human industry) can become good (or effective), ecologically speaking.

Our environmental ethical theories are still stuck in the dualism and morality so finely glossed by the *Cradle-to-Cradle* authors:

Even today, most cutting-edge environmental approaches are still based on the idea that human beings are inevitably destructive toward nature and must be curbed and contained... This approach might have been valid two hundred years ago, when our species was developing its industrial systems, but now it cries out for rethinking (C2C p. 155).

No longer should we take a slave morality approach to apprehending the dominant institution of our time, the corporation. Rather, as the *Cradle-to-Cradle* authors suggest, we should move towards a new industrial method that aligns itself with ecological realities and possibly even mimics nature’s own abundant, life-giving, and nurturing designs. The central idea to glean is that humans and their processes are not by default ‘bad’ – this state of affairs, while historically accurate, can become otherwise. Environmental activists must let go of the eco-slave morality in order for industry to evolve.

What of our philosophies, our ethics, and our worldviews – surely these must evolve to be ecologically adapted as well? We cannot merely overhaul our lifestyles and physical systems without metaphysical work. As Bill McKibben writes of our global environmental status quo, we are in “a race between physics and metaphysics” (AE p. xxx) – we are attempting a cognitive climate change in order that we might ameliorate anthropogenic meteorological climate change. Overcoming contemporary environmental morality represents a huge stride in this direction. Realizing that our ways of being do not have to be by default ‘bad’ is an important first step in rethinking environmental ethics.

Another important stride is to begin to defuse environmental dualism. As mentioned at the outset, our species can also be environmentally ‘good’ developmentally with respect to land use. For this, we must consult Callicott to provide us with little-known biographical information about early-twentieth century American conservationist Aldo Leopold. Leopold is well known for being an advocate of wilderness. He helped to found the Wilderness Society, which has preserved millions of acres of wilderness in the United States. However, he was not necessarily a wilderness purist. Callicott, in his essay “Whither Conservation Ethics?” writes,

Leopold’s vision went beyond the *either* sufficiently develop [conservation] *or* lock up and reserve [preservation] dilemma of the modern conservation *problematique*. Indeed, Leopold himself was primarily concerned, on the ground as well as in theory, with integrating an optimal mix of wildlife—both floral and faunal—with human habitation and economic exploitation of land (BLE p. 328).

As Callicott argues, Leopold “quietly formulated a third conservation ethic envisioning the ideal of human harmony with nature that fosters both economic and ecosystemic health” that goes beyond the conservation vs. preservation dichotomy (BLE p. 22). This human harmony must be such that it complements and contributes positively to the non-human elements of the landscape, as the example Leopold writes about of an ecologically integrated

family farm that must thoughtfully and skillfully execute scores of modifications to improve the biota it inhabits (BLE p. 329).

Callicott suggests that “the only viable philosophy of conservation is, I submit, a generalized version of Leopold’s vision of a mutually beneficial and enhancing integration of the human economy with the economy of nature—in *addition* to holding onto as much untrammelled wilderness as we can” (BLE p. 329). Hereafter, significantly, he defuses environmental dualism:

Lack of theoretical justification complements the sheer impracticability of conserving biodiversity solely by excluding man and his works. Change—not only evolutionary change, but climatic, successional, seasonal, and stochastic change—is natural (Botkin, 1990). And ‘**man**’ is a **part of nature**. Therefore, it will no longer do to say, simply, that what existed before the agricultural-industrial variety of *Homo sapiens* evolved or arrived, as the case may be, is the ecological norm in comparison with which all anthropocentric modifications are **degradations**. To define environmental quality—the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community—**dynamically and positively**, not statically and negatively, is part of the intellectual challenge that contemporary conservation biology confronts (BLE p. 329, emphases mine).

Not only contemporary conservation biology, but also, as we have seen, contemporary environmental ethics faces these challenges. The point is not to leave nature completely untouched, statically “preserving” the environment, but rather to make our modifications in a way that is ecologically integrated, aesthetically pleasing, *and* economically expedient. This is not to say that we should transform everything, but that the transformations we do make need not be desecrations, despoliations, or heinous environmental violations. For some reason, most of Callicott’s writing seems to fall into negative definitions of environmental quality when talking about the human relationship to the environment, as we saw in Section II.

Nonetheless, Callicott helps us to move forward with respect to the contemporary environmental morality latent in the wilderness debate:

It is often possible for people to make a good living—and, in some cases, even the best living to be had—coexisting with rather than converting the indigenous biotic community... I am urging that we think in terms of ‘win-win’ rather than ‘zero-sum’... Further, I would like explicitly to state Leopold’s more heretical, from the preservationist point of view, implied corollary proposition, *viz.*, that human activities may not only coexist with healthy ecosystems, but that they may actually enhance them (BLE p. 330).

This is a move very similar to the one that McDonough and Braungart make with respect to industry. Rather than aim for minimal or zero impact on ecosystems by taking little from or staying out of them altogether, we can inhabit them in a way that is mutually productive and mutually beneficial to both human and non-human parts of the ecosystem.

The example he provides is traditional Papago Indian farming, where in Arizona and Mexico there are two farming oases 30 miles apart. The U.S. government stopped the traditional farming in 1957 to create a National Park bird sanctuary, while farming continued as it had since prehistory in Mexico. There were fewer than 32 species at the National Park,

while there were more than 65 species where farming continued (BLE pp. 330-331). Biologist David Ehrenfeld concludes from the Papago “parable of modern conservation” that “the presence of people may enhance the species richness of an area, rather than exert the effect that is more familiar to us” (BLE p. 331).

Taken together, the above two block quotes unambiguously illustrate that Callicott has a more nuanced outlook than his theorizing tendencies suggest. He radically undermines the environmental ethicist and activist narratives glossed in the Overture. Hidden in this relatively obscure essay, we find a fresh, innovative approach to environmental ethics that Callicott has nested in terms of a philosophy of conservation. He anticipates the thrust of my objections to both contemporary environmental morality and environmental dualism.

Callicott is a complicated figure. Explicitly, in the above quotes, he appears to be immune to contemporary environmental morality and environmental dualism, though elsewhere he is both implicitly and explicitly saturated by these phenomena. Although he acknowledges the potential for humans to be good, his ethical writing both presumes and sets out to prevent the bad. It is difficult to reconcile the heavy-handed Callicott with the more sophisticated Callicott quoted in this section. Callicott himself thinks that his essays are mutually consistent and complimentary (BLE p. 24). Perhaps the only way to account for his apparent contradiction is that he is unaware that what he establishes as a viable philosophy of conservation is also the groundwork for a viable environmental ethic(s).

From all of the above, it seems that environmental ethics can go beyond nay saying and whistle blowing. Rather than being a gadfly on the sidelines trying to rein in or rain on the human parade, proscribing various courses of action, environmental ethics could instead be an active force in proactively prescribing a different course for humanity. Different apprehensions of and comportment to the land can have positive effects on ecosystems, ecologically speaking. This can be achieved not only by a cradle-cradle type evolution in industrial processes, but also by rethinking our land philosophy and praxis, or, put differently, our environmental ethic(s) and resulting action(s). With a different framing and starting point, environmental ethics could be in accord with the flourishing splendor of life (biologically speaking) instead of the jaded, morose, moralizing asceticism that so often characterizes environmental discourse.

IV. Commencement - Changing the Content, Narrative, and Role of Environmental Ethics

Environmentalism, which draws on modern environmental ethics for its conceptual foundations, is in need of a new narrative. Hitherto, the story has been framed primarily in terms of curbing destruction. The story goes that we have a moral imperative to act now so that we do not kill species, so that we do not keep poisoning the water, polluting the air, sterilizing the land, and so that we do not wreck the world for our children. These claims are undoubtedly true, although being cast in such negative, prohibitive terms creates an impasse for their actualization both conceptually and in practice. With such a guiding lens, it is little wonder that we as a species have yet to adopt environmentalist theory and praxis.

Environmental activists and ethicists, afflicted by the contemporary environmental morality, believe they must inflict the environmentalist burden on as many others as possible to reach a critical mass/turning point in consciousness to enlighten humankind about the environment. Again, it is probably true that a critical mass needs to adopt and embody environmental

consciousness to affect genuine change, though doomsday forecasting and gloomy outlooks are not exactly the kind of narratives that are likely to light an inspirational fire for collective action to save the planet and its life forms. More pointedly, a merely oppositional consciousness cannot go far enough beyond the current industrial realities and milieu to envision a completely different alternative.

Unfortunately, our present environmental ethos is not very enlightened or inspired itself; it merely labels the current modus operandi of civilization as 'evil' and says "no" to its direction without having an appealing alternative to point to and adopt. Many environmentalists have given up mainstream life altogether to go live on ecovillages, organic farms, Permaculture homesteads and the like, which arguably embodies the change they want to see and represents a completely different alternative. However, the vast majority of environmental activists are tinkering with making the current system more efficient and less environmentally devastating. Despite recent advances in "green" public appeal, environmentalists are generally left preaching to their converted choir while the skyscrapers, highways, and factories go about business as usual.

We do need different patterns of development, along with a *Cradle-to-Cradle* type of second industrial revolution in order to become an ecologically viable and vibrant species. However, such physical changes are not enough: we need a value shift such that the environment is more intimately rooted in our psyche, a worldview shift such that we are a part of an ecological whole, a systems-thinking view of the larger processes of life upon which we are dependent and to which we contribute. These intellectual, ethical, and metaphysical shifts, though, cannot be guided merely in terms of *not* doing what we are currently doing that is environmentally 'bad' – as we have seen, this is conceptually bankrupt and practically infeasible.

Perhaps we will need a protean ethics suited to variability of context, the content of which will depend on that context. It seems remiss to focus on the content irrespective of the context of an ethic; in environmental issues, as with other ethical issues, one needs to determine the right course of action for this place in this time in these circumstances with these actors. The full meaning of an evolutionary ethic, then, is not merely one that develops as part of a process, but one that is capable of being changed to adapt to context, rather than the forced universality of deontology or the majority vote of classical utilitarianism. Climate change, peak oil, pollution, deforestation, and all of the environmental crises we face are real problems, in real time: they can be addressed, but not without contextualized adaptations of our cognitive, ethical, and metaphysical climates that will accompany our new industries, economies, and technologies.

Environmental ethics may not be able to prescribe the practical implications for the evolution towards sustainability, but it should not constrain the possible. We have no idea what the future will look like short of what we can imagine creating it to be; confining our ethics to the contingences and exigencies of now limits our imagination for a different future by keeping us rooted in the consciousness of the present. A land ethic or any similar evolutionary/ecological ethic opens a possibility for new forms of human life, not merely 'moral' forms of our current ways of life where 'moral' essentially means less disruptive behavior in a fundamentally detrimental system.

Seeing otherwise changes the world. Rather than employing an ethics that tempers the effects of our contemporary economic-centric and anthropocentric worldview, we can shift the worldview itself. With a new (or perhaps much older) way of viewing the land, a different

resulting environmental ethic(s), and a fresh narrative through which we describe both the environment and our relation to it, new possibilities for human life on planet Earth emerge.

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Tim Richards is a 2010 graduate of Haverford College with a degree in Philosophy. This essay is an abridged version of his senior thesis on environmental philosophy. After graduation, he was awarded a 2010-2011 Thomas J. Watson Fellowship for his project “Holistic Environmentalism: Community Approaches to Sustainability” to study the ecovillage, Permaculture, and Transition Town grassroots sustainability movements around the world. He hopes to use the conceptual power of philosophy to contribute to the evolution towards a sustainable and vibrant human society. You can follow the evolution of his journey and thought at <http://sustainablephilosopher.wordpress.com>.

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Steve Hamnett, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia.

Paul James, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Mary Kalantzis, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

Nik Fuad Nik Mohd Kamil, University of Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia.

Lily Kong, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

Thangavelu Vasantha Kumaran, University of Madras, Chennai, India.

Jim McAllister, Central Queensland University, Rockhamptom, Australia.

Nik Hashim Nik Mustapha, University of Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia.

Helena Norberg-Hodge, The International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC), UK.

Peter Phipps, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Koteswara Prasad, University of Madras, Chennai, India.

Behzad Sodagar, University of Lincoln, Brayford Pool, United Kingdom.

Judy Spokes, Cultural Development Network, Melbourne, Australia.

Manfred Steger, Illinois State University, Normal, USA; RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Douglas Worts, LEAD Fellow (Leadership for Environment and Development), Toronto, Canada

David Wood, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada.

Lyuba Zarsky, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia; Tufts University, Medford, USA.

The Sustainability Community

This is a knowledge community brought together by a common concern for sustainability in an holistic perspective, where environmental, cultural, economic and social concerns intersect. The community interacts through an innovative, annual face-to-face conference, as well as year-round virtual relationships in a weblog, peer reviewed journal and book imprint – exploring the affordances of the new digital media. Members of this knowledge community include academics, researchers, policy makers, public servants, members of government and non-government organisations, consultants, educators and research students.

Conference

Members of the Sustainability Community meet at the [International Conference on Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability](#), held annually in different locations around the world.

The Conference was held at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand in [2011](#); University of Cuenca, Cuenca, Ecuador in [2010](#); University of Technology Mauritius, Mauritius in [2009](#); Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia in [2008](#); University of Madras, Chennai, India in [2007](#); Hanoi and Ha Long Bay, Vietnam in [2006](#); and the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Island of Oahu, Hawai'i, USA in [2005](#). In [2012](#), the Conference will be held at the Robson Square, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

Our community members and first time attendees come from all corners of the globe. Intellectually, our interests span the breadth of the various sustainability disciplines and fields of study. The Conference is a site of critical reflection, both by leaders in the field and emerging scholars. Those unable to attend the Conference may opt for virtual participation in which community members can either submit a video and/or slide presentation with voice-over, or simply submit a paper for peer review and possible publication in the Journal.

Online presentations can be viewed on [YouTube](#).

Publishing

The Sustainability Community enables members to publish through three media. First, by participating in the Sustainability Conference, community members can enter a world of journal publication unlike traditional academic publishing forums – a result of the responsive, non-hierarchical and constructive nature of the peer review process. *The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability* provides a framework for double-blind peer review, enabling authors to publish into an academic journal of the highest standard.

The second publication medium is through the book series [On Sustainability](#), publishing cutting edge books in print and electronic formats. Publication proposals and manuscript submissions are welcome.

The third major publishing medium is our [news blog](#), constantly publishing short news updates from the Sustainability Community, as well as major developments in the various disciplines of sustainability. You can also join this conversation at [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) or subscribe to our email [Newsletter](#).

Common Ground Publishing Journals

AGING Aging and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://AgingAndSociety.com/journal/	ARTS The International Journal of the Arts in Society. Website: www.Arts-Journal.com
BOOK The International Journal of the Book Website: www.Book-Journal.com	CLIMATE CHANGE The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses Website: www.Climate-Journal.com
CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT The International Journal of the Constructed Environment Website: www.ConstructedEnvironment.com/journal	DESIGN Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal Website: www.Design-Journal.com
DIVERSITY The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations Website: www.Diversity-Journal.com	FOOD Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://Food-Studies.com/journal/
GLOBAL STUDIES The Global Studies Journal Website: www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com	HEALTH The International Journal of Health, Wellness and Society Website: www.HealthandSociety.com/journal
HUMANITIES The International Journal of the Humanities Website: www.Humanities-Journal.com	IMAGE The International Journal of the Image Website: www.OntheImage.com/journal
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