

Chapter 1. Yes, for the Survival of Humankind.

James Gustave Speth, “The Limits of Growth”

All we have to do to guarantee that we will leave a ruined world for our children and grandchildren, Gus Speth says, is to keep doing what we are doing. But we are in fact increasing the rate of world-destroying activities. The same consumerism that is destroying the environment at exponential rates is failing to meet our deepest needs as humans. How can we challenge today’s false values and find new sources of happiness?

Reading Questions

1. Speth says it’s up to us—“we the people”—to inject values such as sustainability and justice into our nation’s systems, and government is the primary vehicle we have for this task. Why is it turning out to be so hard to get this done?
2. Do you agree that we can’t address climate change in a “corptocracy”? What kind of politics do we need?
3. A powerful progressive force can perhaps be made from the alliance of democracy, environment, and social justice. But not if they have competing goals. Do they?
4. How does one challenge consumerism? What values might replace it? What makes a person truly happy?
5. What does the crisis of inequality have to do with climate change?

Daniel Quinn, “The Danger of Human Exceptionalism”

As we rapidly convert the plants and animals of the world into human biomass, we are decimating species, leaving humans hungry, and destroying the complex ecological systems that sustain us. Once those systems collapse, as they eventually will if we allow it, we will join in the fall.

Reading Questions

1. List the species you are willing to give up or trade for increased human biomass. If that’s hard, consider: Mosquitoes. Polar bears. Dandelions.
2. Is the analogy between the human condition and the penthouse a strong one? What are the similarities? What are the differences? What are “streams of vacancy”?
3. Is human population growth unstoppable by human measures? Why are discussions of population limits so fraught and difficult?

The Dalai Lama, “A Question of Our Own Survival”

Climate change is a crisis of human survival. We humans often fail to see the undeniable connection and mutual dependence of all beings. This shortcoming leads to ignorance,

greed, and lack of respect for living things, which all ultimately cause destruction and jeopardize our own survival. We need to come together in deep reverence for nature, help when we can and at least do no harm if we cannot, and use environmental education “to maintain a balanced way of life” (p. 17).

Reading Questions

1. A leaked cable reported on WikiLeaks says that the Dalai Lama asked the United States to shelve political issues about Tibetan independence and focus instead on climate change on the Tibetan Plateau. Independence can wait ten years, he reportedly said, but we have to immediately address melting glaciers, deforestation, and polluted rivers. Your thoughts?
2. Buddhists believe that every harm creates the conditions for its own healing. Do you?
3. The Dalai Lama says that environmental degradation is caused by failing to recognize the interconnectedness of all things. Do you agree? What are some examples? Are there other failures, or do they all amount to this same thing?
4. Again, what is the source of human happiness? What does that mean for how we ought to live?
5. The Dalai Lama advocates nonviolence toward nature. That sounds good, but what does it look like?

E. O. Wilson, “The Fate of Creation Is the Fate of Humanity”

Civilizations thrive—in the short term—by betraying nature. Because of our “mix of Stone Age emotion, medieval self-image, and godlike technology” (p. 21), we make self-destructive decisions again and again. To save ourselves, we must acknowledge that the fate of humans is as one with the fate of all creation.

Reading Questions

1. Are we indeed a mix of “Stone Age emotion, medieval self-image, and godlike technology”? Give some examples to make this clear.
2. Wilson cites the historical principle that civilizations collapse when their environments are ruined. Other historians say that a common characteristic of civilizations on the verge of collapse is that they have developed into oligarchies—rule of the many poor by the very few rich. The problem then is that the wealth of the rulers shields them from the consequences of their decisions, and they don’t know that disaster is on the horizon until it is too late (al though the poor could have warned them and probably did). What do you think?
3. What are the two tenets of an honest history?
4. Wilson seems to think that scientific knowledge leads to full human spiritual thriving. Does it? How might one argue that it does not, or that some other conditions are more important?
5. Wilson picks up a theme that is central to the entire *Moral Ground* book: We humans are part of natural creation. Does it follow that we will share the fate of our kin, the plants and animals?

* <http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/20/on-our-radar-environment-trumps-politics-dalai-lama-says/>

Sheila Watt-Cloutier, “The Inuit Right to Culture Based on Ice and Snow”

Climate disruption is already undermining the ecosystems of the polar regions, the ice and snow that northern people depend on for their existence. This is a violation of the people’s right to culture, to traditionally occupied lands, to health, and to means of subsistence.

Reading Questions

1. Watt-Cloutier claims that her people have a cultural right to “be cold.” Can you think of similar kinds of rights that other people in the world might claim for themselves should they be allowed to claim these rights? How do these kinds of right compare to the rights of those who profit from harming the Earth?
2. Using the practical syllogism described above in the ethics lesson for the introduction, can you lay out an argument for mitigating the effects of climate change based on the destruction of culture (or even genocide)? Now, how would you write a powerful 300- to 400-word essay making that argument? You do know that newspapers typically accept 300- to 400-word letters to the editor, right?

Barack Obama, “The Future I Want for My Daughters”

Because we have borrowed the planet from our children, we have an obligation to return it to them in good condition. This requires some hard choices. But it also offers the opportunity for innovation, job creation, and new business models for the world. “Let’s be the generation that finally frees America from the tyranny of oil” (p. 31).

Reading Questions

1. President Obama argues that we are borrowing this planet from our children and our grandchildren. Play out that analogy. “Borrowing” in what way? What does that mean for how we should act?
2. Obama says we need to be the generation that frees American from the tyranny of oil. In what ways is oil a tyranny? How are tyrants usually overthrown? So how should we go about overthrowing the tyranny of oil?
3. Okay, here’s a very common claim: “We can turn this crisis of global warming into a moment of opportunity for innovation, and job creation, and an incentive for businesses that will serve as a model for the world” (p. 31). Leave aside the question of whether this is true. Is this a wise argument, a prudent argument, or might it turn around to bite us? Compare it to the ethics-based arguments in this book.

Alan Weisman, “Obligation to Posterity?”

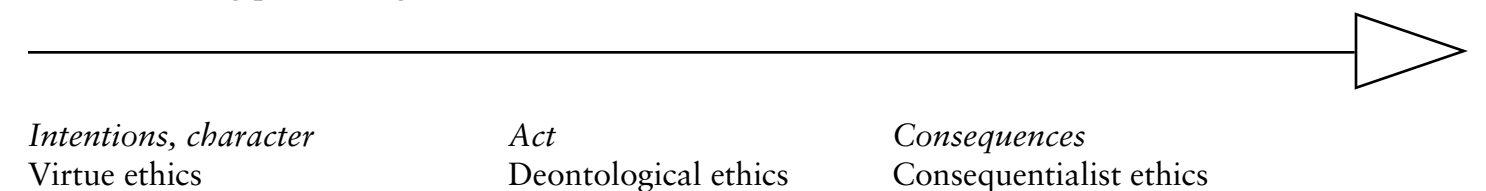
Appeals to morality are limited in effect. They will not address the pressing issues of climate change quickly or strongly enough. To address those issues, we need to appeal to motivations that prompt action in all humans—greed and selfishness. If anything moves us to effective action, it will be self-interest.

Reading Questions

1. Do you agree that selfishness and greed are the most powerful motivators and our only hope? If so, is that going to be good enough? Why haven’t selfishness and greed already motivated the world to action?
2. What is your strongest motivator? Do you think you are different from other people in this regard?
3. Note that recent polls show that there is virtually no significant difference in the carbon footprints of those who are “very concerned” about climate change and those who are not concerned at all. That suggests that something is motivating people to limit their carbon footprints, and it is not concern about climate change. It also suggests that something is blocking concerned people from acting on their concerns. Would this surprise Alan Weisman?
4. On a scale of 10 (strongly agree) to 0 (disagree entirely), where are you in regard to Weisman’s argument? Wherein do you agree and disagree?

Ethics Background: What kinds of moral reasons can be given? What is a basic taxonomy of moral theories?

An act is not a single point in time. Any act begins with a set of intentions that grow from a person’s character. Then the act itself unfolds. That act has consequences into the future. So one might think of an act as taking place along a time line, as follows:



Different moral theories place importance on different parts of the time line. **Virtue ethics**, for example, focuses on the intentions or character of the actor, rather than on the nature of the act itself: an act is right if it is the sort of act a person of good character or strong virtue would choose to do.

Deontological ethics (from the Greek word deon, which means “duty”) focuses on the nature of the act itself. An act is right if it conforms to duty, which can be variously understood as following God’s commands, respecting the rights of others, acting justly, and so forth. **Consequentialist** ethics focus on the results of the act. An act is right if it results in consequences that are better than any other act possible under the circumstances. The consequences can be those that affect human beings, in which case we speak of anthropocentric consequentialism, or they can be those that affect all of creation, in which case we speak of biocentric consequentialism.

Activity / Application: A case study for anthropocentric and biocentric consequentialism

Read the following case:

When Frank and I bought the land that straddles the Marys River, included in the deal was a little dam that blocked the river bank-to-bank. The Marys is a small river that empties into the Willamette River from the hills west of town. It's barely a creek by Oregon standards. The dam wasn't much of a dam either, just a three-foot-high concrete wall built by a farmer to power the paddle wheel for his private electrical plant. By the time we bought the land, the farmer had moved on, and the paddle-wheel blades had rusted off and washed downriver. But the dam remained.

Even though it was insignificant as dams go, our dam made life hard for the Willamette River cutthroat trout. At high water, the cutthroats could migrate over the dam to the feeder streams to spawn. The problem came at low water, just when the river started to warm up and the fish were heading downstream again to cooler, deeper water. Then, our dam blocked the Marys, forcing fish to hang out in warm slack water, waiting for rain. The dam blocked canoeists too, who had to portage through a wicked blackberry bramble or jump out of their boat, haul it across the dam, and climb in again—tricky stuff with a loaded boat. But what bothered me most, I guess, was the whole idea of somebody thinking it was okay to stop a river, to silence it, to make it into something else, something muddy and useful to one person. (Moore, *Pine Island Paradox*)

What should we do?

Make the argument based on utilitarianism reasoning (anthropocentric consequentialism).

Remember your tools:

The utilitarian principle: An act is right if, of all the acts possible under the circumstances, it results in a greater balance of human happiness over human suffering (thus, taking into account the interests of all the people affected by the act, and weighing the intensity, duration, propinquity [closeness], and quality of the happiness and suffering).

The practical syllogism:

1. The relevant facts about the case (in this case, the hedonistic calculus)
2. The moral principle
3. The conclusion

Now, make the argument again, based on biocentric consequentialism.

Do you reach a different conclusion?

Chapter 2. For the Sake of the Children

Oren Lyons, “Keepers of Life”

All of us, human and other-than-human, share a common future in which what happens to one happens to all. For the survival of our Earth and the thriving of the children, we must join hands with all creation, hold the seed as the law of life, and speak from common sense, responsibility, and peace.

Reading Questions

1. Oren Lyons says that we are instructed to love our children, indeed to love all children. But does that make sense? How has our love for our children gone wrong? And anyway, shouldn't we love our own children more than other people's?
2. What do you believe is our primary responsibility to others?

Scott Russell Sanders, “We Bear You in Mind”

Speaking to an unborn child, Scott Sanders shares his love of the great, good Earth and his hope that the child also will discover a world of wonder and gratitude. The choices he makes today, he understands, will shape that world and determine the future of the child. “We cared for you,” he tells the child.

Reading Questions

1. If you'd like to hear Scott read his essay, go to www.orionmagazine.org/community/ and click on link below the Moral Ground book cover.
2. What role should love have in ethics? What about sorrow?

Gary Snyder, “For the Children”

As measures of human impact on the Earth rise, and as human thriving and future prospects go down, how shall we live?

Reading Questions

1. Snyder wrote this poem in 1974. How is that possible, to be so prescient?
2. What are your three closing lines?

John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I, “Steering the Earth Toward Our Children’s Future”

Humankind has a God-given mandate to serve as stewards of the Earth. In this, we often fail, doing harm to God’s creation. This is a sin. We must restore the original harmony by honoring our responsibilities toward ourselves, others, and creation. The challenge requires not just an economic or technical response, but a moral and spiritual answer to the call.

Reading Questions

1. What questions would you like to ask these men of wisdom and experience?
2. What is a steward? Where does that word come from (etymologically)?
What is the goal of stewardship?

Hylton Murray-Philipson, “A Letter to My Boys”

The economic model with which the world is working is not fit for our purposes in this century. The current financial crisis offers an opportunity to do things differently. We need to fully value the natural services that ecosystems provide. We should also levy taxes to conserve forests and human futures.

Reading Questions

1. What is the single most surprising thing this former investment banker says in his essay?
2. Murray-Philipson wrote this as a letter to his children. What would you say in a letter to your children or grandchildren? Perhaps most important, what can you say to them to empower them?

Derrick Jensen, “You Choose”

The problems we have created will not be solved by some miraculous transformation of the human spirit and worldview. If they can be solved at all, it will be by dismantling the institutions and practices that created the problems and allow them to persist—the capitalist growth economy, those who lead it, and those who tolerate or ignore its atrocities.

Reading Questions

1. What do you think of the analogy between hypothetical aliens destroying the planet and the destruction of the planet that results from the actions of the industrial growth economy? How are they similar? How are they different? What do aliens and corporations have in common?
2. Denying the rich “their ability to steal from the poor, and denying the powerful their ability to destroy the planet” (p. 63): If this were your goal, what would be your first step? Second?
3. Like Nazi doctors, Jensen claims, we do everything but the most important thing—question the existence of this current death culture. What do you think of this analogy? Is our society like a Nazi death camp? If so, are we like the Nazi doctors, doing our best, but supporting a system that is profoundly wrong?
4. Do you believe that this culture will undergo a voluntary transformation to a sane and sustainable way of living? What are the chances? Ten percent? Twenty? Remember this number (the question will recur as you come to the end of the book).
5. Read p. 65 (first paragraph) aloud. Now, write your own sentences of the same form (“This is given,” etc.) and read them round-about.

Ethics Background: What is utilitarianism?

A particular form of anthropocentric consequentialism is **utilitarianism**. Like all consequentialism, utilitarian reasoning assumes that an act is *right* if its results are *good*. (Note the vocabulary: we speak of acts as right and states of affairs as good). Utilitarians believe that the highest human good is happiness (or pleasure and the absence of pain). They further believe that acts should be judged by the degree to which they create that highest human good. Thus, an act is right if it results in greater human happiness than any other act possible under the circumstances: the Greatest Happiness Principle.

This is the moral reasoning that underlies much of environmental policy in the United States today. It is the basis for risk/benefit analysis. “One should act to protect the Earth,” “for the sake of human survival,” and “for the sake of the children” are most likely utilitarian arguments, because they justify an action by the good consequences it will have.

Activity / Application: Complete the following questionnaire:

Questionnaire

1. How much poison are you willing to eat for the success of the free market and global trade? Please name your preferred poisons.
2. For the sake of goodness, how much evil are you willing to do?
Fill in the following blanks with the names of your favorite evils and acts of hatred.
3. What sacrifices are you prepared to make for culture and civilization? Please list the monuments, shrines, and works of art you would most willingly destroy.
4. In the name of patriotism and the flag, how much of our beloved land are you willing to desecrate? List in the following spaces the mountains, rivers, towns, farms you could most readily do without.

5. State briefly the ideas, ideals, or hopes, the energy sources, the kinds of security, for which you would kill a child. Name, please, the children whom you would be willing to kill.

—Wendell Berry

Okay, well. Let's think about this. What makes this such a heart-wrenching poem?

Consider: We do, of course, eat poison, do evil, sacrifice cultures, desecrate lands, and kill children. We don't, however, often think of what we get in return. To think of these sorts of exchanges as deliberate market transactions or trades is excruciating. So why is it easier to do these things when we don't think of why?

Consider: We can bear to think of our damage in general terms, perhaps. Why is it so much more terrible when we are forced to name what and whom we destroy?

Chapter 3. Yes, for the Sake of the Earth Itself.

Brian Turner, "Sky"

So many losses, so many sins. How can the Earth express its grief?

Reading Questions

1. What does Turner's poem presuppose about the nature of the sky?
2. Is there such a thing as merciful ignorance?
3. Try changing "sky" to something else: if the *gods* knew half . . . or, if the soil knew half . . . or, if the *wind* knew half. How does that new poem end?

Holmes Rolston III, "A Hinge Point of History"

Our dualistic worldview has created an unsustainable world by valuing people above nature and consumption above concern for all life. So great has been the human impact that we have ended the Holocene Era and entered the Anthropocene. What is needed is an environmental ethic that places humans at home in landscapes, in culture, and also within nature.

Reading Questions

1. What is maladaptive in human behavior, do you think? What is highly adaptive? (You might need to consider the question, adaptive for what?)
2. How would you answer the would-be planetary manager's question about what kind of life we want on what kind of planet?
3. What does it mean to expand the sphere of our moral concern?

F. Stuart Chapin III, "The Planet Is Shouting but Nobody Listens"

Alaska is warming more rapidly than almost any other place on Earth. As a result, forest fires are increasing in frequency, permafrost is melting, and aboriginal people are losing their livelihoods. This is an alarm call that the world seems not to hear. We need to draw the connection between planetary changes and the deep human motivations as stewards of the Earth.

Reading Questions

1. You all know the argument about climate change as a natural process—which, if you employ the practical syllogism, looks something like this:
(1) Climate change is a natural process. [factual premise (Note: That the premise is "factual" doesn't mean it's true, just that it's a purported fact.)]

(2) We should be unconcerned with natural processes. [value premise]

(3) Therefore, we should be unconcerned with climate change.

In what way does Chapin challenge the first premise? How might we challenge the second premise? How might the skeptic alter the argument to continue to make this claim?

2. Chapin suggests that the planet is telling us what's wrong—"whispering," "shouting," "calling out"—but we are not listening. Do you think this is true? If you do think it is true, why are we not listening? Once you think you know why we are not listening, what can be done about it? What can make us listen?

Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Bells of Mindfulness"

The future of the Earth depends on our actions. Because our own lives are a message we send, we are challenged to live in ways that turn our desires for peace and sustainability into reality.

Reading Questions

1. "Our own life has to be our message" (p. 79). Wow. If so, then we had each better ask these questions (write your answers down): What message do I want my life to send? What acts might I do to send that message? What acts do I do that might prompt someone to read a contrary message?
2. Explain the chicken analogy. Are we like chickens? If so, how might we escape our "chickenhood"?
3. "The American dream is no longer possible" (p. 81), Thich Nhat Hanh writes. What is that dream? What is a new dream? Is that new dream possible?

Robin Morris Collin, "Restoration and Redemption"

The casualties of our wasteful lives are others—outsiders, poor people, people of color, children. We must make amends for wrongs to the Earth and to the people for wrongs that degrade them and us, even if the one terrible wrong we committed was to enjoy the fruits of wrongdoing.

Reading Questions

1. Morris Collin refers to nature as the "one great truth-teller" (p. 82). What does this mean, and what are the truths that nature tell us?
2. Morris Collin tells us that humans have chosen to be "winged like angels and armed like demons," that "we began organizing our lives around greed" (p. 84). What are the most profound examples of this, past and present?
3. What is the antidote to these ills—from Morris Collin's essay and from your own life and mind?

Kate Rawles, "A Copernican Revolution in Ethics"

The dominant worldview of industrial capitalism, which imagines humans are separate from the rest of the world and gives free rein to narrow self-interests, is the driver of our unsustainable societies. We must create a new Copernican revolution, embracing a holistic worldview that manifests compassion and justice in our relationships with all beings.

Reading Questions

1. What was the Copernican revolution? What is an ethical Copernican revolution?
2. Tell a story, as Rawles does, about some time when you have had a meaningful encounter with another life-form.
3. What would you give up to save the basking shark? Write it down. What would you give up to save the life-form in question 2 above? What determines the value of your sacrifice?
4. "I want to live with a lighter footprint and a clearer conscience, and I want more time in my life!" (p. 93). Doesn't everybody? Don't you? So let's think about this. What is one thing you can do that will advance all these goals at once? Fine. So why don't you do it?
5. What is success?

Ethics Background: What is the difference between instrumental and intrinsic value?

Instrumental value is the value something has as a means to achieving a goal, that is, as an "instrument" to an end. A pair of pliers isn't of much value in itself, for example: it's just a few ounces of metal. But the pliers are often of great instrumental value, as a way of tightening the pin that holds the oarlock to the boat and allows you to return to harbor, perhaps, or as a hammer to smack in a rivet that threatens to open a leak in your hull.

Additionally, some things have value in and of themselves—not because they are good for something else (although they may be), but because they are valuable, period. That sort of thing has **intrinsic value**. A child has **intrinsic value**. It is good that the child exists, not because the child could be put to work as a beggar (although she could be) or because her kidneys could be sold for a profit (although they could be), but because she is a good thing—valuable for her own sake, independent of her value as a means to other ends. In fact, we would consider a person morally deficient who thought of a child only as a means to other ends and never as an end in herself.

Many moral arguments about how we ought to treat the Earth or living forms center on whether they have intrinsic value or have only instrumental value. A songbird has instrumental value—he cheers us with his song and serves as food for falcons and eats mosquitoes, let us say. Does a songbird also have value in itself? If so, then we have obligations toward it, independent of its usefulness to our ends.

Philosophers offer a thought experiment to reveal whether you believe the Earth's living creatures have intrinsic value: the Last Person experiment. If you were the last person on Earth, let us say, and you were about to depart for another planet, leaving Earth forever without human presence, would it be wrong to flip the switch that would set off a holocaust that would destroy every living thing on Earth? If you believe that would be wrong, then you ascribe intrinsic value to Earth's denizens, value beyond their usefulness to human ends (which is, according to the assumptions given, zero).

Chapter 3. Yes, For the Sake of the Earth Itself

Activity / Application: The Law of Mother Earth

Bolivia will soon become the first country in the world to pass legislation that grants rights to nature. La Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra (the Law of Mother Earth) grants nature many rights equal to those held by humans, including the right to life, the right to water and clean air, and the right to be free of pollution. The laws, which will be overseen by a new ministry of mother earth, will require new attitudes toward conservation and a recognition of the interests of the entity that the Bolivian indigenous people call Pachamama. Local communities will have the responsibility and authority to enforce the new laws by regulating industrial pollution. Although Bolivia has been outspoken in the global arena about the need for action on climate change, its challenge will be to balance the rights of nature with the needs of industries, such as mining, that support its economy.

In theory, is this a model that the United States should follow? What would be the implications? In practice, why would such a law be virtually inconceivable in the United States? Or put the question differently: what would have to change in the United States for such a law to be passed?