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Environmental Ethics and the Problem of Community

TIMOTHY C. WEISKEL

The life around me must be full of significance to itself. If I am to expect others to respect my life, then I must respect the other life I see, however strange it may be to mine. And not only other human life, but all kinds of life... Ethics in our Western world has hitherto been largely limited to the relations of man to man. But that is a limited ethics. We need a boundless ethics...

—Albert Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*

Let me state the problem quite bluntly. I think we are in big trouble. Truly terrifying trouble. Trouble from which it is not likely that we will ever fully recover unless and until we develop a radically new sense of community. The “we” involved here is not just those of us interested in religion or ethics nor more generally the liberal political activist community. Nor, for that matter, is it simply the “we” as Americans or the “we” that designates us as among the inheritors of European political, cultural and intellectual traditions. No, the “we” involved here is the entire human species and perhaps a good portion of the larger families of mammals and vertebrates that we have emerged within and belong to in evolutionary terms.

Biologists reassure us that the invertebrates and microbial species are likely to survive our current epoch relatively unscathed. Yet, if you are anything like me, this message provides small comfort when one begins to realize that the larger point is that *life as we know it* is undergoing massive extinction. More precisely, geologists, evolutionary biologists and paleontologists are now reporting evidence in their professional journals that we are currently in the midst of a global “extinction event” which equals or exceeds in scale those catastrophic episodes in the geological record that marked the extinction of the dinosaurs and numerous other species.

At least two important differences exist between this extinction episode and those previously documented in the geological record. First, in previous events of similar magnitude the question of agency and the sequence of species extinctions have remained largely a mystery. In the current extinction event, however, we now know with a high degree of certainty what the effective agent of system-wide collapse is, and we have a fairly good notion of the specific dynamics and sequence of species extinctions. Secondly, previous events of this nature seem to have involved extraterrestrial phenomena, like episodic meteor collisions. Alternatively, the long-term flux of incoming solar radiation that results from the harmonic convergence, the earth's asymmetrical path around the sun, and the "wobble" on its axis also drive system-wide changes generating periodic advances and retreats of continental ice sheets in high latitudes. These too cause system-wide transformations and have precipitated extinction events in the past.

In contrast to these extraterrestrial or celestial phenomena that served as the forcing functions behind previous mass extinctions, the current extinction event results from an internally generated dynamic. The relatively stable exchanges between various biotic communities have shifted in a short period of time into an unstable phase of runaway, exponential growth for a small sub-set of the species mix—namely, human beings, their biological symbionts, and their associates.

The seemingly unrestrained growth of these populations has unleashed a pattern of accentuated parasitism and predation of these growing populations upon a selected number of proximate species that were deemed by them to be useful. This accentuated parasitism led to the creation of anthropogenic biological environments which, in turn, drove hundreds of other species directly into extinction—sometimes within periods of only a few centuries or decades. More significantly, however, this pattern of unrestrained growth and subsequent collapse has repeated itself again and again, engendering in each instance a syndrome of generalized habitat destruction and over time precipitating the cumulative extinction of thousands of species as one civilization after another has devastated its environment, and dispersed its remnant populations

far afield in search of new resources to plunder and squander.

For a variety of reasons—some of them apparently related to traditional religious beliefs—humans remain fundamentally ignorant of or collectively indifferent toward the fate of their fellow species, insisting instead that measurements of human welfare should be the only criteria for governing human behavior. Apparently, the “right to life” is effectively defined as the “right to *human* life.” In system terms this anthropocentric belief in human exceptionalism has characterized past civilizations and remains no less dominant today. The most pervasive form of this religiously held belief in our day is techno-scientific salvationism. Scientists and techno-boomers alike promise us that technological miracles will save us from our rapidly deteriorating ecological circumstance and that no substantial sacrifice will be required of us. After all, “thanks to science” we have miracle crops, miracle drugs, and Miracle Whip! What more could we need?

Well, the fact is we need a great deal more to survive as a society and as a species. In reality, we are just beginning to recognize the true immensity of the problem.

Consider, for example, the truly dramatic dimensions of our recent growth as a species. By recent, I mean in evolutionary terms and in terms of the relatively long time scales required to engineer stable social adjustment to changing circumstance. In evolutionary terms, it took since the dawn of humanity to roughly 1945 for the human species to reach the total figure of about two billion people. That figure has more than doubled—indeed, nearly tripled—just since 1945. In the next 30 years experts predict that figure could well reach a total of nine billion people if left to grow at projected rates.¹

Consider as well the overall ecological “footprint” of human expansion over the millennia, particularly as we have come to congregate in cities. Depending upon how one wishes to segment us from our biological relatives, humans have been around for roughly a million years or so. It is only in the last 1.2 percent of that history—roughly the last 12,000 years—that we have come to depend upon agriculture, and only the last 6,000 years or so that we have begun to transform our settlement patterns into urban concentrations. We are still in the midst of what might be called the “urban transition” in

the human evolutionary experiment. It is not clear that the transition will be successfully achieved or that the human bio-evolutionary experiment will endure very much longer in evolutionary terms. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence available about the urban transition in human history to begin generating some general statements.

The new evidence of environmental archaeologists is especially sobering in this context. The history of cities has been associated with the history of repeated ecological disaster. The growth of cities has engendered rapid regional deforestation, the depletion of groundwater aquifers, accelerated soil erosion, plant genetic simplification, periodic epizootics among pest species and animal domesticates, large scale human malnutrition, and the development, incubation, and expansion of epidemic disease. In many cases the individual elements of ecological decline have been linked in positive feedback processes which reinforced one another and led to the precipitous collapse of particular cities.

To overcome the limitations imposed by these patterns of localized ecological collapse, cities have historically sought to dominate rural regions in their immediate vicinity and extend links of trade and alliance to similarly constituted cities further afield. As arable land and strategic water supplies became more scarce and more highly valued, violent conflict between individual city-states emerged, leading in short succession to the development of leagues of allied cities and subsequently to the formation of kingdoms and empires with organized armies for conquest and permanent defense.

Even with the limitations of pre-industrial technology, the results of these conflicts could be devastating indeed to local or regional ecosystems, particularly when victorious groups sought to destroy the ecological viability of defeated groups with such policies as scorched-earth punishment and the sowing of salt over the arable land in defeated territory. The ecological impact of warfare and the preparation for warfare has been devastating in all ages.

Demographic historians have added further details to the picture of repeated ecological disaster painted by environmental archaeologists. Human populations have demonstrated again and again the long-term regional tendency to

expand and collapse with remnant populations driven to radiate outward from the depleted core or former civilizations. These undulating patterns are referred to by demographers as the “millennial long waves” (MLW), and they appear to be manifest in both the old world and the new.²

Two patterns are discernible across all cases despite the considerable differences between each region. First, the human population is both highly unstable and highly resilient. That is to say, there is considerable variation in the amplitude of the population waves, and therefore human populations cannot be considered stable in regional terms. Moreover, the population is resilient in the sense that it recovers from demographic catastrophe with an even stronger surge in reproductive performance. The second phenomena of the MLW on the regional level is that the frequency between their occurrence is successively shortened. Thus populations seem to be collapsing and rebounding at higher and higher levels more and more frequently as we approach the present.

When we move beyond the regional evidence to a global scale, another important pattern emerges. On this level of analysis it seems that human populations seem to expand in spurts, corresponding to the quantities of energy they are able to harness with their available technology—a new way of stating the Malthusian theory of population limit. In the eighteenth century, Thomas Malthus focused on the relation of populations to their food supply and pointed out that while populations tend to grow exponentially, the food supply tends to grow only arithmetically. As a result, populations are ultimately limited, according to Malthus, as their reproductive performance outstrips the food supply needed to keep them alive, and there are periodic wide-spread famines.

Since Malthus we have come to realize that “food” itself is really “energy”—a form of captured solar energy (i.e., kilocalories) that humans can assimilate to maintain themselves and do work. If we build upon this observation to reformulate Malthus’s observation in terms of energy instead of food itself, we are probably close to a broad-level truth about the human species. Simply put, the Malthusian law can be restated in these terms: human populations tend to expand to the level supported by the supplies of energy that they can mobilize with available technology.

The industrial era in world history marks an unprecedented period in human evolution history from this perspective. Never before have global populations experienced such high rates of growth for such sustained duration, reaching a worldwide climax with an average annual population increase of 2 percent during the decade from 1965 to 1975. The demographic historian, Paul Demeny, has described this extraordinary period quite succinctly:

It took countless millennia to reach a global 1700 population of somewhat under 700 million. The next 150 years, a tiny fraction of humankind's total history, roughly matched this performance. By 1950 global human numbers doubled again to surpass 2.5 billion. The average annual rate of population growth was 0.34 percent in the eighteenth century; it climbed to 0.54 percent in the nineteenth century, and to 0.84 percent in the first half of the twentieth. In absolute terms, the first five decades following 1700 added 90 million to global numbers. Between 1900 and 1950, notwithstanding two world wars, an influenza pandemic, and a protracted global economic crisis, the net addition to population size amounted to nearly ten times that much.³

As Dr. Demeny summarizes the situation:

Clearly, viewed in an evolutionary perspective, the 250 years between 1700 and 1950 have witnessed extraordinary success of the human species in terms of expanding numbers, *a success that invokes the image of swarming*. [emphasis added]

For demographic historians, then, it would seem that humans in the modern era are behaving much like a plague of locusts.

What is even more striking is that the pattern of distribution of this burgeoning population is one of rapid relocation into massive urban agglomerations. In 1700 less than 10 percent of the total world population of 700 million lived in cities. By 1950 a full 30 percent of the global population lived in cities. In North America the urban proportion of the population had reached 64 percent by that time, while in Europe it was 56 percent.

In 1700 only five cities in the world had populations of 500,000 people. By the turn of this century that number had risen to 43 cities in the world with populations of 500,000 or more. Of those, only 16 cities had populations over 1,000,000. By now, however—that is to say in a span of under 100 years—there are nearly 400 cities that exceed 1,000,000, and there will soon be more than twenty “mega-cities” with populations in excess of 10,000,000 people, thirteen of which are expected to be in Asia. ⁴

We are confronted, then, in every respect with a growing problem. Moreover, it is clear that we cannot avoid the problem. We have no choice but to cope with it in some manner or another. As a species we are already well in the midst of a major bio-geo-physical transformation of the earth. The irony is that while we are at this point the principal agents of system-wide transformation, we are not in any meaningful sense in *control* of that transformation. The ecosystem embodies interconnections between species which have proved to be far too complex to predict and virtually impossible to control. Indeed, it is not yet clear whether we will be able as a species to stabilize our own population dynamics effectively, let alone orchestrate sustainable interactions between all other species upon which we depend for our existence.

Can we survive enduring flux and escalating instability? Techno-boomers will assure us *of course we can*. All we need is adequate investment incentives, a sense of determination, inventiveness, and political will to make the tough decisions.

This may well be true, but it is essentially beside the point. The far more interesting question is: *will* we survive it? Not just theoretically *can* we, but, in a very practical sense, *will* we?

This larger question can only be answered by re-examining what we mean by “we” and what we mean by “survive.” Techno-scientific salvationists—like other fundamentalists—are regrettably silent and often sadly ignorant of the social dimensions of the changes required to answer this larger set of questions. Indeed, I would argue they are helpless in the face of such questions. Techno-boomers can do no more than offer us more of the same patterns of

accelerated production, excessive consumption, and the illusion of continuous growth that got us into our sad circumstance in the first place.

At heart, our problem is this: our ecological impact as a species far outstrips our sense of moral community. We are just now beginning to monitor the radiological impact of the Chernobyl disaster upon populations in nations far removed from the former Soviet Union. Less obvious but even more insidious, we can now detect PCBs in the body fat of penguins in Antarctica. The mounting tragedy is that just as our collective behavior registers a wider and wider ecological impact, our sense of effective community under stress is sharply shrinking.

A sense of moral compulsion cannot be imposed effectively from above, no matter how loudly it is preached from on high. Moral and ethical imperatives emerge spontaneously from a shared sense of community—a feeling that what “I” do or what “we” do matters to others within a community of which I wish to be a part. Our past record as a species is not encouraging in this regard. Historically, those considered to be *outside* the moral community have simply been ignored, or—worse yet—legitimately persecuted in the name of the ethical principles of those *within* the boundaries of the recognized moral community. Clearly our notions of what is *outside* and what is *inside* must change if we are to survive much longer as a human species in a wider biological community.

Environmental ethics, then, can be seen as an aspect of the more fundamental problem of community. In the time we have remaining, can we fashion and believe in a collective sense of belonging to a global life process that transcends our home, our family, our class, our nation, and indeed our species?

If our contemporary reactions to Somalia, Liberia, East Timor, Haiti, Zaire, and numerous other “hot spots” around the world are any indication of what is to come, the signs are not entirely encouraging. Left to our default behavioral modes, our effective sense of community seems to shrink in times of crises. Religious identities have all too frequently been implicated in this pattern of inward-looking retreat from responsibility. In historical terms humans have not shown an ability to create and control stable ecological communities for very long, and many societies have accelerated their

decline through an unreflective affirmation of chauvinistic nationalism or archaic religious beliefs.

There have been, however, within most major religious traditions, luminary figures whose vision transcended their own circumstance and the narrow definitions of community of their contemporaries. Albert Schweitzer was one such figure whose works deserve renewed attention in this regard. Scandalized by the brutality of European colonialism and disillusioned by the pattern of competitive nationalism in industrial civilization, Dr. Schweitzer chose to leave Europe for Africa and minister to human need in the equatorial rain forest. There in Lambaréné, Gabon, as Europe embroiled itself in the worst struggle it had ever known from 1914 to 1918, Dr. Schweitzer developed his philosophy which he summed up as a life-long affirmation of the "reverence for life"—not just human life but all forms of life. This philosophy envisioned a radically new kind of community and focused on a new ethical imperative.

At the time, Dr. Schweitzer realized that both his sense of community and the ethics it implied were quite distant from views commonly held in his day. In particular, although Schweitzer was an acknowledged biblical scholar and had been the director of a religious seminary in Europe, he felt keenly that Christian theologians of his day were hostile to his ideas. As he put it:

I have the feeling that the Christian theologians are reluctant to come in through the door I have tried to open. I have tried to relate Christianity to the sacredness of all life. It seems to me this is a vital part of Christianity as I understand it. But the Christian theologians, many of them, confine Christianity to the human form of life. It does not seem to me to be correct. It lacks the essential universalization that I associate with Jesus. Why limit reverence for life to the human form? ⁵

Ultimately, Schweitzer consoled himself by thinking that perhaps he was ahead of his time, declaring that eventually humanity as a whole would respond to his logic.

It is the fate of every truth to be an object of ridicule when it is first acclaimed. It was once considered foolish to suppose that black men were really human be-

ings and ought to be treated as such. What was once foolish has now become a recognized truth. Today it is considered as exaggeration to proclaim constant respect for every form of life as being the serious demand of a rational ethic. But the time is coming when people will be amazed that the human race existed so long before it recognized that thoughtless injury to life is incompatible with real ethics. Ethics is in its unqualified form extended responsibility to everything that has life. ⁶

Living as we do in an ecological age, we have now come to realize from scientific observation that Schweitzer's concept of human connectivity with all living things has a basis in empirical reality that even Schweitzer could not have anticipated. Yet our capacity to recognize and respond to this expanded community of life has not kept pace with our scientific insight. In this regard, Schweitzer's judgment upon European civilization over 70 years ago may prove to have been prophetic.

The disastrous feature of our civilization is that it is far more developed materially than spiritually. Its balance is disturbed... Now come the facts to summon us to reflect. They tell us in terribly harsh language that a civilization which develops only on its material side and not in the sphere of the spirit... gets out of control at a constantly accelerating pace, and thereby heads for disaster. ⁷

Unless exceptional leaders—religious and otherwise—can articulate in our day a new and compelling spiritual vision of community that reflects our scientific understanding, we are likely to destroy the larger living community upon which our life depends for its sustenance. **g**