

# The Need for a Planetary Ethic \*

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Values and beliefs determine the way we perceive the world and suggest the ways we prioritize the responses to our perceptions. They are essential for the survival for our species; they affect almost all areas of human behavior. However, in the wider context of society, individual values and beliefs are often at odds, they are unlikely to conform to a common standard on their own. But attempting to impose values and beliefs “from above” would be misguided and, as historical experience testifies, is likely to produce negative results. Self-regulation is just as important in the values-sphere as it is in any other sphere of society. If we are to create better chances of human survival we need to introduce some self-regulatory mechanism in civil society. In a democratic context this must be a *moral* mechanism, more exactly a moral code or principle. And in a globally interdependent world it must be a universally acceptable and spontaneously shared moral code or principle: a *planetary ethic*.

A planetary ethic is a major imperative of our time. We all have our private morality: our personal ethic. This varies with the personality, the ambitions, and the circumstances of each of us. It reflects our unique background, heritage, and family and community situation. We also have a public morality, the ethic shared in our community, ethnic group, state or nation. This is the ethic the group in which we live requires of us in order for it to function. It reflects its culture, social structure, economic development, and environmental conditions. But there is also a universal morality--a planetary ethic. This is the ethic the human family as a whole requires so that all its members can live and develop.

Universal morality is an essential part of private and public morality. It respects the conditions under which all people in the global community can live in dignity and freedom, without destroying each other's chances of livelihood, culture, society, and environment. It does not prescribe the nature of our private and public morality--it only ensures that they do not give rise to behaviors that are damaging to the planetary community that is the vital context of our lives.

How could a morality shared the world over arise and spread in society? Traditionally, setting the norms of morality was the task of the religions. The Ten Commandments of Jews and Christians, the provisions for the faithful in Islam, and the Rules of Right Livelihood of the Buddhists are examples. Today the dominance of science has reduced the power of religious doctrines to regulate human behavior, and many people look to science for practical guidance. Yet scientists, with some notable exceptions, discover few principles that would provide a basis for universal morality. Saint-Simon in the late 1700s, Auguste Comte in the early 1800s, and Émile Durkheim in the late 1800s and early 1900s all tried to develop "positive" scientific observation- and experiment-based principles for a meaningful and publicly acceptable ethic. This endeavor, as a whole, however, was so foreign to science's commitment to value neutrality and objectivity that it was not taken up by mainstream twentieth-century scientists.

In the final decade of the twentieth century scientists as well as political leaders began to recognize the need for principles that would suggest universal norms of behavior. In April 1990 in the "Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities," the InterAction Council, a group of twenty-four former heads of state or government, expressed this conviction: "Because global interdependence demands that we must live with each other in harmony, human beings need rules and constraints. Ethics are the minimum standards that make a collective life possible. Without ethics and self-restraint that are their result, humankind would revert to the survival of the fittest. The world is in need of an ethical base on which to stand."

The Union of Concerned Scientists, an organization of leading scientists, concurred. "A new ethic is required," claimed a statement signed in 1993 by 1670 scientists from seventy countries including 102 Nobel laureates. "This ethic must motivate a great movement, convincing reluctant leaders and reluctant governments and reluctant peoples themselves to effect the needed changes." The scientists noted our new responsibility for caring for the Earth and warned that "a great change in our stewardship of the Earth and the life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated." Human beings and the natural world, they said, are on a collision course. This may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life as we know it.

In November of 2003 a group of Nobel laureates meeting in Rome stated, "Ethics in the relations between nations and in government policies is of paramount importance. Nations must treat other nations as they wish to be treated. The most powerful nations must remember that as they do, so shall others do." And in November of 2004 the same group of Nobel laureates declared, "Only by reaffirming our shared ethical values — respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms —and by observing democratic principles, within and amongst countries, can terrorism be defeated. We must address the root causes of terrorism—poverty, ignorance and injustice —rather than responding to violence with violence."

Undoubtedly the time has come to give serious attention to a morality that can be embraced by all people regardless of their creed, religion, race, sex, or secular belief. It must have intuitive appeal, addressing the basic moral instinct present in all healthy individuals. This merits serious thought. Because the egalitarian ideals of Marx, Lenin, and Mao failed in the practice of communist countries, the highest expression of everyday ethics for the great bulk of humanity has been liberalism, the conceptual heritage of Bentham, Locke, Hume, and the classical school of British philosophers. Here ethics and morality have no objective basis: human actions are based on self-interest, moderated at best by an element of altruistic sympathy. People are not to be prevented from pursuing their self-interest as long as they observe the rules that permit life in civilized society. "Live and let live" is the liberal principle. You can live in any way you please, as long as you do not break the law.

In today's world classical liberalism makes for a misplaced form of tolerance. Letting everyone live as they please as long as they keep within the law entails a serious risk. The rich and the powerful could consume a disproportionate share of the resources to which the poor, too, have a legitimate claim, and both rich and poor could inflict irreversible damage on the environment that we have to share with them.

Rather than "live and let live," we need a planetary ethic that is just as intuitively meaningful and instinctively appealing as the ethic of liberalism but better adapted to current conditions on this planet. Such an ethic would substitute for liberalism's "Live and let live" Gandhi's "Live more simply, so others can simply live." This idea needs further refinement, however, because we are not concerned with the intrinsic simplicity

of lifestyles but with their impact on society and nature. This must not exceed the capacity of the planet to provide for the needs of all its inhabitants. In consequence the planetary ethic we need is better stated as: "Live in a way that allows others to live as well."

Living in ways that enable others to live as well is the planetary ethic of our time, but is it practicable? Will it be accepted and embraced by a significant segment of society? This question will not be decided by moral philosophers but by processes within democratic societies. The times when kings, popes, and princes could decide what is moral and what is not are over. In a democratic world principles regulating people's behavior come from the people themselves.

Thomas Jefferson said, if you believe that the people are not sufficiently informed to exercise the power of demos in society, the democratic solution is not to take power from their hands but to inform them. Informing others of the requirement for an ethic adapted to our time is not a quixotic endeavor. If people realize that there is a real need for a planetary ethic, and that abiding by it does not dictate the nature of our private and public morality, or entail undue sacrifice, they will respond with interest and alacrity.

The need for a planetary ethic is real, and its relevance to human survival can be made evident. Human life is intimately tied to the lives of other species, in fact, to the entire biosphere. If we continue to interfere with the ecological balance established among the diverse species, conditions in the biosphere will evolve along pathways distinctly inhospitable to humankind's well-being and threatening for its survival. Agricultural lands will erode, weather patterns will turn hostile, water tables will fall and ocean levels rise, lethal radiation will penetrate the atmosphere, and micro-organisms fundamentally incompatible with our organism will proliferate. A wide variety of ecocatastrophes will come about.

We can also make clear that abiding by a planetary ethic does not entail particular sacrifices. Living in a way that enables others in the biosphere to live as well does not mean being self-denying: we can continue to strive for excellence and beauty, personal growth and enjoyment, even for comfort and luxury. But in the context of a planetary

ethic the pleasures and achievements of life are defined in relation to the quality of enjoyment and level of satisfaction they provide rather than in terms of the amount of money they cost and the quantity of materials and energy they require. This ethic requires that we take into account the basic question, "Is how I live and what I do compatible with the right to life of others?" Does it allow access to the basic resources of life for six-and-a-half billion humans, and for the plants and animals that populate our life-supporting environment?

These questions must be answered by each of us in regard to everything we do. They can be answered using a basic rule of thumb: envisage the consequences of your action on the life and activity of others. Does it, or does it not, rob basic resources from them? Does it, or does it not, despoil their environment? These questions are not impossible to answer. By way of example, we should look at three of the most widespread practices in the contemporary world: eating meat, smoking, and the use of the private automobile.

## **EATING MEAT**

Cutting back on our consumption of meat is both a sustainability and a health imperative. World meat consumption has risen from 44 million tons in 1950 to 217 million tons by 1999, nearly a fivefold increase—an untenable trend. In addition, the meat we buy today is not the safe meat grandmother bought in 1950. Quite aside from the danger of it being infected by mad-cow disease, it is likely to contain progesterone, testosterone, avoparcin, and clenbuterol—chemicals farmers pump into cattle to fatten them up and keep them healthy. Anabolic steroids, growth hormones, and beta-agonists turn fat into muscle; antibiotics stimulate growth and protect sedentary animals against diseases they would not get if they were kept in more natural conditions.

A diet based on heavy meat eating is not only unhealthy, it is immoral: it indulges a personal fancy at the expense of depleting resources essential to feed the entire human population. Red meat comes from cattle, and cattle must be fed. The grain fed to cattle is removed from human consumption. If cows returned equivalent nutrition in the form of meat, their feed would not be wasted. But the calorific energy provided by beef is only one-seventh of the energy of the feed. This means that in the process of converting grain

into beef, cows "waste" six-sevenths of the nutritional value of the planet's primary produce. The proportion is more favorable in poultry: an average chicken uses only two-thirds of the calorific value of the feed it consumes.

There is simply not enough grain to feed all the animals that would be needed to supply meat for the tables of the world's entire population. These giant herds of cattle and endless farms of poultry would require more grain than the total output of the agricultural lands--according to some calculations, about twice as much. Given the amount of land available for farming and the known and presently used agricultural methods, doubling today's grain production would call for economically prohibitive investments. The rational and moral solution is to phase out the mass-production of cattle and poultry--not by massive slaughter but by breeding fewer animals and breeding them healthier.

The nutritive needs of the entire human population can be satisfied by eating more vegetables and grain and less meat, using first and foremost the produce of one's own country, region, and environment. Grain- and plant-based food self-reliance provides a healthier diet, and it allows the world's economically exploitable agricultural lands to be worked to satisfy the needs of the whole of the human family.

## **SMOKING**

What goes for meat eating also goes for smoking. The fact that smoking is dangerous to health can be read on every packet of cigarettes, but it is not generally known that growing tobacco for export robs millions of poor people of fertile land on which they could grow cereals and vegetables. As long as there is a market for tobacco exports, agribusinesses and profit-hungry farmers will plant tobacco instead of wheat, corn, or soy. The market for tobacco exports will remain as long as large numbers of people continue to smoke. Tobacco, together with other cash crops such as coffee and tea, commands a considerable portion of the world's fertile lands, yet no such produce is a true necessity.

Reducing the demand for tobacco—and for animal feed, coffee, tea and similar cash crops—would mean a healthier life for the rich and a chance for adequate nourishment

for the poor. A better pattern of land use would permit feeding eight, or even ten billion people without conquering new land and engaging in risky experiments with genetically manipulated crop varieties. With today's consumption patterns, on the other hand, the world's agricultural lands can barely feed the human population. It takes only 1 acre of productive land to provide the average Indian's agriculture-related needs, but satisfying the needs of a typical American takes fully 12 acres. Making 12 acres of productive land available for all six billion people alive today would require two more planets the size of Earth.

## **DRIVING**

According to a World Bank estimate, by the year 2010 the population of motor vehicles will swell to one billion. Unless there is a rapid shift to new fuel technologies--which is possible, but difficult to achieve worldwide--doubling the current motor vehicle energy requirements would double the level of smog precursors and greenhouse gases. Cars and trucks would choke the streets of third world cities and the transportation arteries of developing regions. This level of motor vehicle use is not a necessity in either the industrialized or the developing world. For goods transport, rails and rivers could be more effectively used, and for city dwellers, public transportation could be pressed into wide-scale service, reducing the number of private vehicles. In most cases this would reduce the material standard of living but not the quality of life.

Being moral in our day means thinking twice before taking one's car to town when public transport is available. It means taking pride in clean and well-kept subways, trams, and buses, and traveling sociably in the company of others rather than in the air-conditioned and cell-phone and hi-fi equipped isolation of a private automobile. If one is physically fit, short trips by bicycle make for a happier choice still: besides saving fuel, reducing traffic congestion, and cutting down on pollution, one benefits from an extra dose of fresh air and exercise.

We know that the urban sprawl created by the widespread use of private automobiles is undesirable, that traffic jams are frustrating and counter-productive, and that the gasoline-powered internal combustion engine uses up finite resources and contributes to air

pollution and global warming. Today there are perfectly good alternatives to the classic automobile: cars running on natural gas, fuel cells, compressed air, or liquid hydrogen, to mention but a few. Yet people continue to demand and use gasoline-powered cars. As long as the demand keeps up, industries will not introduce the alternative fuels and cities and states will not procure cleaner and more efficient public transportation.

The switch from the liberal morality of classical industrial society to a more global and responsible ethic is slow in coming; the initially noble but now outdated liberal precept "live and let live" persists. For the most part, affluent people still live in a way that reduces the chances for the poor to achieve an acceptable quality of life. If all people used and overused private cars, smoked, ate a heavy meat diet, and used the myriad appliances that go with the affluent lifestyle, many of the essential resources of the planet would be rapidly exhausted and its self-generative powers would be drastically reduced.

Clearly, the poor people of the world must also adopt a planetary ethic. If they persist in pursuing the values and lifestyles of the affluent, little will be gained. It is not enough for well-to-do Americans, Europeans, and Japanese to reduce harmful industrial, residential, and transportation emissions and cut down on gross energy consumption. If the Chinese, the Indian, and other poor country populations continue to burn coal for electricity and wood for cooking, implement classical Industrial Age economic policies, and acquire Western living, driving, and consumer habits, nothing will be gained. Only if a critical mass of people in the contemporary world adopt a planetary ethic do we have a realistic chance of creating a world where the right to life and well-being is assured for all, and the human impact on the environment does not exceed the self-regenerative capacities of the live-supporting environment.

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