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Capitalism and Ethics: Cutting to the Chase

Contribution to GTI Forum [Toward a Great Ethics Transition](#)

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Let's just cut to the chase here: we can't talk about ethics without talking about capitalism. By any ethical standards, capitalism is an inherently unethical system. What can be more unethical than being concerned with one's own self-profit, regardless of the consequences ("externalities") to others and the planet? Ethics is, above all, concerned with our interconnectedness—our relatedness, interdependence, and responsibility to others, including both other humans and the natural world of which we are a part. So trying to graft ethics onto a capitalist system simply can't work—they are antithetical. Beyond a mere statement of ethical ideals (to which we would almost all agree), we need an economic system that embodies them—a new economic system whose central values, priorities, and structures are inherently ethical, flowing from the core recognition of our interdependence and therefore the need to cooperate, equitably, justly and sustainably, with each other and all of nature, in which we are inextricably embedded.

Capitalism is, historically, the culminating expression of a divisive consciousness—individualism, competition, domination, limitless rapaciousness, and exploitation of other people, cultures, and the planet; these are the values it exalts and rewards. Self-profit—taking more than one gives—is its central motive, its highest value, and in its advanced, neoliberal, deregulated version, there are no holds barred. It is inevitable that such an "ethic"—antithetical to all true ethics—would lead to the crises we are facing today, existential in every sense, both in making meaning of life and our very survival. So it is clear that any truly ethical, as well as any effective, approach to addressing our crises demands a new global economic system, based on the foundational ethical tenets of interdependence, cooperation, mutual responsibility to each other and all of nature; equity, justice, and social and ecological regeneration flow naturally from that basis.

If we can't evolve to an ethics and economics of unity, we will simply not survive. We are being compelled to move from a divisive consciousness to a unitive one, and embody it in action—which means an ethics of interdependence at the center of our economic, ecological, and governance systems. Our crises are delivering this imperative as an ultimatum. If we fail to rise to this call, we simply will not survive, even as we bring down thousands of other species with us.

As to how to avert our demise, our primary concern at this point should be less with configuring an ethical framework (I think most of us agree with that by now) than in generating political traction for the changes so urgently needed. [Richard Falk](#) named some of the major obstacles we face, and I can think of two others. First, the neoliberal decades have bred a sense of apathy and powerlessness, disabling in those who lived through them a sense of agency, will, and imagination, both moral and creative. Second, and more recently, many people of good will, even erstwhile activists, while convinced and alarmed by the crises, have also been convinced that it is too late now to make any difference. This attitude, apparently, has been deliberately promoted by some of the same forces profiting from the crises that until very recently were promoting denial—now that it is too late to deny the exploding crises, doomerism serves the same purpose of ensuring inaction; in either case, the continuation of their business as usual goes unchallenged. This doesn't mean, of course, that our situation isn't a dire one—it is. It just means that giving up (or just “adapting”) and allowing business as usual to continue actually guarantees our demise, as hopelessness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We need to use crisis mode to motivate further action, not dampen it... But what action, and to what ends?

The bright spot on the horizon is, of course, the uprising of the young people and the mass nonviolent civil disobedience protests (the School Strikes, Extinction Rebellion, etc.) that have gained such momentum in the last year. I keep thinking if this momentum—itsself driven by the desire, implicit though still inchoate, for a new ecological, ethical, and regenerative system—could be galvanized and wedded to a practical plan for transition, we stand our best chance of surviving and thriving into the future. Such a plan could be collaboratively generated by the most knowledgeable and progressive alternative economists, indigenous and social justice activists, spiritual and ecological leaders, and the new young activists with the freshness of their passion and imagination. Such an alliance could provide, for instance, Greta Thunberg and the school strikes

movement, with clear demands and a detailed plan of action, that doesn't leave the solutions in the hands of the governments or the corporate-banking nexus that are causing the crises, but clearly demands a whole new direction and steps for its implementation.

I think we need a transition plan—a kind of Global New Green Deal, not just for the transition to renewable energy but a whole new society, ethical, ecological, and regenerative—a vision that can channel, give shape and direction to the passion for change rising up so powerfully from the youth and grassroots now. I do not think this can be left to blessed unrest alone or an inchoate movement with no name. We need to articulate a clear vision and access the most potent leverage points to move it forward. Now that the passion and energy for change are rising up so powerfully from the youth and grassroots, this may be the most powerful moment to galvanize that transition. In that way, we would put our ethics into action.

About the Author



Kavita Byrd works to bring together holistic consciousness, healing, and whole-systems change, with an emphasis on evolutionary spirituality and sacred activism. This has included research on ecology, climate change and new economics, integrating universal spiritual wisdom and radical social action for evolutionary global transformation. She is the author of the poetry collection *Love Songs of the Undivided* and the book *Quantum Co-Creative Revolution: We Are All in This Together*. She holds a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing from Princeton University.

About the Publication

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