



February 2020

Ethical Leadership in the Civilization Rupture

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

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The theme of relating ethics to ecological sustainability is a crucial dimension of planetary viability for the peoples of the earth and even more so for the many species non-human beings that live together with humans throughout the world. The raging wildfires of Australia that have taken more than one billion animal lives should be viewed as an apocalyptic event although the lethal effects on human beings have been relatively minor, at least so far. Yet the Australian inferno is nevertheless a metaphor depicting a flaming future for humanity and its shared destiny with the whole of nature. Beyond this, the small number of direct human casualties totally discredits and ethically undermines the kind of anthropocentric worldview that has guided modernity at least from the time of the Industrial Revolution. What we can and must learn is that human activity cannot and should not be safeguarded at the expense of its natural surroundings, both for our sake and theirs. Although this might be obvious to the ecologically minded minority among us, it is not reflected in the behavioral patterns of either the public or private sectors of society, or the media, which remain in virtual denial of the structural impacts of human activity on global ecosystems, the central explanation for regarding our time as that of the Anthropocene.

In his opening [essay](#), Brendan Mackey makes perceptive observations about the appropriate framework of shared values to address the unmet challenges of the Anthropocene. My concern is less with configuring the ethical framework than in providing political traction for the mounting dangers of catastrophic scope associated with the failure to deal effectively with such fundamental issues of ecological accommodation as global warming and diminishing biodiversity. What has become alarmingly evident is less the ethical gap than the failures of

political leaders, private sector elites, and media moguls to act on the basis of scientific knowledge and longer-term interests.

My view is that it is quite widely known what should be done to achieve a transition to conditions of ecological equilibrium, but that such knowledge is not acted upon because of several imposing obstacles:

Short-termism: There is a troubling mismatch between the accountability cycles of political, financial, and corporate leaders and officials, rarely more than a few years, and the time horizons of ecological challenges that impinge catastrophically and, quite possibly, irreversibly, but are perceived, if at all, as posing insufficient immediate threats to justify expensive and controversial policy adjustments. Such a mismatch could be viewed as an “ethical” deficiency, but it is more generally understood as the link between time expectations with respect to political performance and time expectations relating to ecological adaptation.

Special interests: Reinforcing these short time horizons of policymakers are a variety of collective entities that are opposed to making adjustments because of cutting into profits or heightening economic and political risks. For instance, the importance of coal exports in Australia exerted influence on national politicians of the party in power not to restrict coal as a source of energy or to impose carbon emission controls.

Ideological and religious dogma: Capitalist thinking tends toward trusting markets, and distrusting states and public institutions; this makes it difficult to regulate the private sector in accord with the public interest, or even to clarify the public interest as understood by science and rationality. Likewise, some *fundamentalist* religious doctrines generally oppose taking steps that challenge the omnipotence of God or divine governance as expressions of *hubris*.

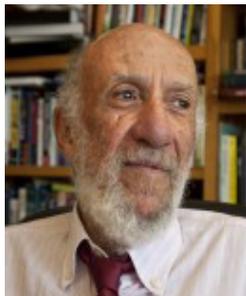
Emergency diversions: Wartime conditions, situations of political tension, and acute economic stress resulting from food insecurities or disease epidemics divert attention from the more abstract and remote threats of climate change or loss of biodiversity.

Technophilia: There is a widespread confidence among business leaders and politicians that sense that technology will provide solutions to ecological challenges when problematic effects reach a crisis stage.

Against this background, the Earth Charter is a helpful counter-ideological text that enlightens us about the ethical foundations of what should be and needs to be done to uphold planetary viability, but so far fails to take the indispensable next step, which is to depict the politics that might make these values operational on a sufficient scale as to meet the challenges and safeguard the human and non-human future of living together on one earth in a benevolent fashion. In this sense, the Earth Charter and kindred expressions of ecological worldviews have established an overall ethical consensus. Although as the comments in this forum confirm, there is much work to be done when it comes to refining the ethical consensus. This consensus has affected public opinion, as bolstered by such adverse experiences as extreme weather events, droughts, floods, fires, and mass migration, and yet we still lack a sufficient political will or atmosphere of urgency to address root causes of these Anthropocene challenges in a manner that would hasten attaining the goals of the GTI.

Depicting the ethical framework is useful, but what makes change happen on such a momentous scale has to be more transformative in spirit and substance, which depends on nothing less than what has sometimes been called a “second Axial Revolution.” Perhaps, a better formulation is to speak of the need for a “civilizational rupture,” the break with the expansionary and materialist vision of modernity and its replacement by an ecologically crafted civilization that is sensitive to the ecological limits and positive potentialities of the Anthropocene. Such an eco-political transformation of values postulates a radical civilizational future that is neither predictable nor achievable by normal procedures of advocacy and political agitation. We know a lot about what needs doing, but not very much about how to get it done. To exhibit urgency may catalyze a movement with transformative energy, and so all efforts to align with an earth-centered worldview can be considered as preparation for the hard work ahead to ensure species survival grounded on a revolutionary and a new ecological equilibrium.

About the Author



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Cite as Richard Falk, "Ethical Leadership in the Civilizational Rupture," contribution to GTI Forum "Toward a Great Ethics Transition," *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/ethics-transition-falk>.

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