

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for September 16, 2021, based on the complete essay "Ethics and Ecology" in *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (pp.100-06)

In this mid- September season when roughly half of the continental United States is severely parched or aflame, and the other flooded or sodden, climate catastrophe presses in from the abstract and the future. Undoubtedly, its presence and worsened threats informed last week's announcement of federal policy to quicken the pace and percentage of reliance on solar and wind energies to replace the continuing devastation of a carbon burning economy. So too did climate demise finally dictate the decision by Harvard, the world's wealthiest university, to divest itself of all holdings in the fossil fuel industry. But if those heartening indications from governmental and educational institutions to engage principled deliberations to forestall a dangerously overheating world, there remains a question about their protracted response to harm about which evidence was known some 50 years ago. The same reservation may be held of the entire range of human cultural processes.

From its first emergence and throughout its historical development as a social species, the human has shaped and consolidated its identity and coherence, ratifying its meaning and purpose, conserving its ordered stability and consistency through the delineation of values and norms guiding decisions both quotidian and exceptional. Across familial, clan, tribal, state and national configurations, human capacity for broadly ethical deliberation and determination, while varying in complexity and application, is an essential and long settled feature of human thought.

But if ethical consideration has become a deeply habituated resource, well exercised for the clarification of problematic concerns seeking resolution, its focus, at least in the Western tradition, has remained within an exclusively human horizon. So intensely centered on its own intra-species concerns that ethical sensibility towards the natural world progressively atrophied, even as that world's jeopardy became ever more apparent. Microphase human concerns continued to vigorously engage ethical discourse, but with mute responsiveness to the macrophase enormity of planetary destruction. Suicide, homicide and genocide were accorded an appropriate ethical consideration, but biocide and geocide were beyond the pale of conceptualization and found no parlance in the moral lexicon of anthropocentrism." We find ourselves ethically destitute " writes Thomas Berry " just when, for the first time, we are faced with ultimacy, the irreversible closing down of Earth's functioning in its major life systems. Our ethical traditions... collapse entirely when confronted with... the extinction of the vulnerable life systems of the Earth, and... the devastation of the Earth itself. " (p.104)

But if intense self-absorption in the profusion of its microphase concerns has left the contemporary human morally insensitive and ethically speechless before the macrophase immensity of Earth's harm, its institutional tardiness and necessary but woefully inadequate governmental and educational measures of last week, demand further accounting from religious and economic complicity in their failure.

In its historical elaboration, if not in its primordial inspiration, the Western spiritual tradition has worked a profound ambiguity in human consciousness in its relationship to the natural world. Over time, the original Edenic sanctity and goodness of the created order, the garden of communion with the divine, was marred by the insinuation of human superiority, mandated to

dominate and wary of the garden's seductive allure and failure to fully satisfy. Into that alienation and longing there arose a redemptive mystique with its expectation of release from the world's dissatisfactions, a perfected fulfillment in a whole new order of a heavenly Jerusalem. Over the centuries of its ascendancy this millennial orientation in Western consciousness, with its attendant obligations for securing its promise, received macrophase attention in moral discourse even as concern for the fate of Earth receded to a much diminished microphase commitment. So it was that as religion itself reluctantly surrendered primacy in the public sphere of the 17th century onwards to Baconian humanism on the one hand and Cartesian mechanism on the other, inert, inanimate and infinitely extractable Earth, lacking all ethical gravity, became progressively vulnerable to utter ruination from the commercial-industrial enterprise of the 19th and 20th centuries. For, the millennial discontent with the existing order of things, shorn of its originally religious aspirations, remained a powerful, however furtive presence within the Western psyche. With masterful craft, market capitalism of the last two centuries adroitly tapped into and skillfully manipulated human dissatisfaction and desire with the insinuation that fulfillment was as near at hand as any of the tantalizing items increasingly available for sale. With ever more sophisticated enticement and with relentless insertion into every manner of media, the mercantile juggernaut, while actively provoking insatiable desire, promised surfeit in some consumer wonderworld, to use Thomas Berry's phrasing, even as its progressive depredations of the planetary body reduced it to a ruinous waste world. To those who would raise alarm at the current climate symptoms of that failing world, it is utterly vacuous for a certain religious remnant, ethically compromised by its long-ago abandonment of creation care, to yet proffer some apocalyptic divine intervention to rapturously deliver the faithful from the end times of their own making. Not the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem, but the deepest conversion of the human cultural process is the transformation here required. And however mired in the microphase concerns of its long-settled anthropocentrism, the human yet has access to the immense psychic energy for the macrophase liberation and reorientation of its religious, educational, economic and legal institutions. Having arisen as the necessary and indispensable structures for human self-understanding and self-expression from within the primordial creativity of the genetic code, their renewal comes from that very same source. For, prior to any cultural formations, the genetic code of the human species is the point of its most intimate communion with Earth's waters, soils, atmosphere and other living beings. The requisite wisdom to live within the integral body of Earth in the macrophase ethos for its healing and preservation will arise from that genetically endowed communion and from nowhere else.

Thank you,

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