



February 2021

Intimations of Transcendence

Contribution to GTI Forum [Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy](#)

Herman Daly

The Promethean animal, of course, is us, *Anthropos*, and as with other animals, it is the planet Earth that by evolution gave us life and all the non-unique attributes that we share with other living things on whom we depend. Just as with our fellow creatures, evolution has fitted us for life on Earth, not on Mars, Saturn, or even the Moon. Yet we uniquely transcend other living beings, who, however wonderful they may be in various ways, lack our capacity for thought, science, technology, art, philosophy, and goodness—as well as for evil and delusion.

This was true before the Anthropocene, and it is even more evident after. Many neo-Darwinian materialists deny transcendence, and leap from the facts of ecological interdependence and common ancestry of all species to the illusion of equality of all species—a leap that requires the denial, or at least gross understatement, of human transcendence. This denial is painted in the politically correct colors of humility and species democracy. What hubris, some say, to claim a unique transcendence denied to our fellow creatures! A bit of hubris perhaps, but wrapped in a thick blanket of false humility that insulates us from living up to the obligations of our transcendence.

True, the kinship of humans with the rest of life is strong, and we differ in our DNA by only a very small amount from our nearest cousins who do not share the Promethean exuberance that has led to the Anthropocene. For such a small material difference to explain all of language, science, technology, art, religion, mathematics, music, etc., makes one look beyond materialism in search of a transcendent spiritual explanation. Or if one is wedded to materialism, as so many are nowadays, one must at least regard the small genetic human difference to be analogous

to a small material key that unlocks a large door beyond which are material possibilities so discontinuously novel as to be transcendent.

Traditionally, we have located transcendence in the spiritual realm beyond the reach of materialism. In modern secular times, belief in the spiritual dimension of existence has waned, and what remains of it is more and more smuggled into the material realm, there to be reborn (or misbegotten?) as the Singularity, Space Colonization, Infinite Growth, and Transhumanism. Rather than “rejoin our unique transcendent endowment to the planet that gave us life,” we seem to want to cut ourselves completely free from any transcendent endowment, as well as from our mother planet, and go floating untethered to the cold, distant, dead, and radioactive vacuum of space. The suffering Earth is not our responsibility. Such is the “Anthropocene” of the untamed Promethean animal whose transcendence is neither recognized nor rejoined in service to the Earth.

What we now call the “Anthropocene” seems to be a merely half-baked and half-hearted use of the unique gifts bestowed on *Anthropos*. To deserve the term “Anthropocene” requires a more grateful and willing acceptance of our unique transcendent endowments, and of the duty to the rest of Creation that it entails.

About the Author



a

Herman Daly is an ecological economist and Emeritus Professor at the University of Maryland, School of Public Policy. From 1988 to 1994, he was a Senior Economist in the Environment Department of the World Bank. Prior to that, he was a professor of economics at Louisiana State University, where he taught for twenty years. He has served as Ford Foundation Visiting Professor at the University of Cear  (Brazil), Research Associate at Yale University, Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University, and Senior Fulbright Lecturer in Brazil. He was co-founder and associate editor of the journal *Ecological Economics*. He has written extensively on theorizing the steady-state economy and co-developed the Index of Sustainable Welfare. He holds PhD from Vanderbilt University.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Herman Daly, "Intimations of Transcendence," contribution to GTI Forum "Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy," *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/anthropocene-daly>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.