



February 2020

## Ethics and the Good Life

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

Roger Gottlieb

The Earth Charter has many strong points to recommend it: above all, a realization that human attitudes and actions towards the non-human have a moral, and not just an instrumental or cognitive, dimension. Likewise, there is the crucial assertion that these moral dimensions have deep ramifications for the way humans treat each other. Humanity is far from uniform in its power to determine environmental practices, nor homogenous in how different groups suffer from foolish and destructive environmental policies.

Therefore, any attempt to share and support the Earth Charter is, in my view, a Good Thing.

Here are some obstacles. The most important is that most people, for most of the time, do not believe that nature has moral value. Or if it does, that it does not have very much. Or if it has a lot, it does not have nearly as much as people. Despite the quite large and widespread teachings of virtually all dominant world religions on this score, environmental issues still take second, third, or fourth place behind poverty, gender, sexuality, immigration, war and peace, and—for far too many in first place—having the Right Beliefs about God or some pressing social issue.

Moreover, let us imagine that in the future a cultural transformation of great magnitude could occur, and the notion that nature has moral value—and an enormous amount of it—would become widespread. Let us take a close look at the world in the present and ask ourselves: now we all agree that people have moral value. But how are we treating each other? The obvious answer of “not very well” is supported by statistics on poverty, wealth inequality, needless wars, ethnic hatred, child abuse, violence against women, neglect of the elderly and disabled, the

rising tide of fascism, government suppression of dissidents, and widespread efforts to subject the population to addictions to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, mindless entertainment, and cell phones.

In short, do we have any confidence that any ethical teaching is capable of moving human behavior—or moving it for very long—towards morality?

Doubtful, at best.

Let us, however, take another tack.

What is the justification for the Earth Charter? Indeed, how can we justify any ethical code whatsoever? Religious appeals fall in the face of secularism and religious diversity. Secular systems tend to depend on questionable principles (act so that everyone else could act this way), essentially empty tautological directives (pursue the greatest happiness), claims that cannot be justified (we have “rights”), or psychology that presumes we can identify what forms of life make people happy (virtue theory).

If there were a rock-bottom foundation for morality, I suspect we would have found it now. That generation after generation of moral theorists have claimed to find it gives further credence to the idea that it simply is not findable.

But what if instead of justifying moral principles and values by appeal to something existing—God, human nature, conditions of rational assertion, etc.—we simply tried to describe, in as much detail as possible, what life would be like if people lived by these values and then see if people want that kind of world? For example, don't take nature seriously as a moral subject, and you get more plastic than fish in the ocean, the biggest die-off of species in 70 million years, wildfires in Greenland and the Arctic, hundreds of billions of dollars of weather-related losses per year just in the US, the rainforest being razed for palm oil and soybeans, disastrous floods, etc.

Likewise, if we cut ourselves off from nature, we suffer from a variety of maladies psychologists now term “nature deficit disorder.” Obsessively looking at our phones produces anxiety, an epidemic of nearsightedness in adolescents, social uncertainty, and ever-increasing alienation from what is actually around us.

Looking at trees, birds, the ocean, clouds, flowers, and bees does none of these things. In short, our current form of life is unhealthy, dangerous, and depressing. Is that not a convincing argument?

Sadly, no. While, as an argument, it might be rock-solid, arguments—no matter how rational—have little effect on addicts. And one way to understand the globe's current malaise is as a combination of addictions: to power, wealth, distraction, pleasure, rage, and escape. To radically alter our relation to nature—and the consequences of that relation on fellow humans—we would have to get clean and sober. But addicts do not live for the long term; are incapable of facing the truth; and will lie, steal, and commit violence to support their habits. A casual glance at the morning news indicates just how addicted both the ruling classes (corporate and political elites) and the rest of us are.

However—and here I would offer a slight hope—no addict ever looked like she or he would ever recover, but some of them do. We have no idea what makes recovery possible. There is no bottom to hit, for, after all, you do not hit bottom until you stop digging.

Yet we do know that as a necessary condition of recovery, the addict must come to believe that another form of life is at least possible. And thus the importance of teaching the values of the Earth Charter, as well as reminding all of us that there have been bright environmental moments in the last decades: the Montreal Protocols, which eliminated the threat of ozone-depleting CFCs; joint efforts by Israelis and Palestinians on water pollution; small group efforts to save this or that endangered species; millions of children who see the truth and are demanding that their elders respond.

Is any of this enough? Not, for me, to give hope. But, at least, to give me a little courage to carry on.

---

## About the Author



Roger Gottlieb is a professor of philosophy at Worcester Polytechnic Institute and the author or editor of 21 books and over 150 essays on political philosophy, religious environmentalism, environmental ethics, the Holocaust, and contemporary spirituality. He has won book prizes for fiction (*Engaging Voices*) and for *Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters*. His most recent book is *Morality and the Environmental Crisis*.

---

## 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 Roger Gottlieb, "Ethics and the Good Life," contribution to GTI Forum "Toward a Great Ethics Transition," *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/ethics-transition-gottlieb>.

---

## 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.