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Justifying Universal Ethics

Forum contribution: [Toward a Great Ethics Transition](#)

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Brendan Mackey's [advocacy](#) of “normative ethics based on universal values and principles presumed to be shared by all people, nations, and cultures” is an essential component to any transitional strategy beyond the flawed and dangerous framework that now prevails globally today as it has for millennia in the West. His essay deserves praise for articulating a position seldom expressed in the voluminous writings on the environmental crisis: the fundamental importance of universal ethics. This is crucial to any contemporary discussion of the environmental crisis as well as any proposals to address it, such as the Earth Charter.

However, despite the essay's focus on universal normative ethics, it seems surprisingly bereft of the necessary component of ethical discourse: ethical argumentation, i.e., the making of ethical claims and the provision of reasoned evidence for their rational support. Without it, Mackey's essay risks reinforcing the misguided stereotype that ethics consists of platitudes with little specific practical relevance in the real world where people live and policymakers render decisions.

We will not achieve any Great Transition merely by asserting the abstract need for universal moral guidance: one must get down to specific arguments for such guidance. For example, there is a need for alternative worldviews because the presupposed worldviews of human-centered ethics with human supremacy over all other living species and natural ecosystems needs to be criticized and replaced with a sounder and more sustainable foundational environmental ethic (e.g., I prescribe the Confucian tradition).

It is clear we need ethics in environmentalism today. Hegemonic anthropocentrism is mistaken in its arrogant human chauvinism and is the major cause for the environmental crises we face. Universal ethical frameworks are desirable, as Mackey contends, but what matters is not just their abstract and general level of discourse and application—universalism—but their specific content. The anthropocentric belief that the human species is both separate and superior to the rest of nature results in the belief that the entire planet's resources are ours to exploit. This universal claim is fatally misconceived and possibly lethal to our species and planet if its acceptance continues.

The most valuable sentence I found in Mackey's essay from the ethical point of view occurs toward the end of the essay: "If the promise of the Earth Charter is to be realized, a platform is needed... for new universal norms and principles to guide our responses." This position seems quite similar to several such calls for a new "story," paradigm, or worldview.¹ I have tried in my own work to examine the values of Confucianism, most recently, the cosmology of an eleventh-century Neo-Confucian. Therefore, I wholeheartedly agree with Mackey's call for a new ethical framework, but the specific nature of the Earth Charter must be explained and evidence provided for it, not just its universal status. All ethical claims are understood to be universal.²

In conclusion, I laud Brendan Mackey for prescribing the importance of ethics and recommending the Earth Charter. However, to be rationally convincing and to have an impact in the real world, a persuasive ethical argument must precede any discussion of how the Earth Charter was created, how it is to be interpreted, and how it is to be implemented worldwide. The absence of argumentation reinforces the prevailing view of ethics' irrelevance to the urgent environmental challenges confronting us, delaying further the desperately needed transformation of our global fallacious, arrogant, and self-destructive anthropocentrism and ruination of the planet.

Endnotes

1. For one example, see, *Thomas Berry's The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988).

2. See "the universal perspective" as one of four required "elements of ethics" in Lewis Vaughn, *Beginning Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (New York; W. W. Norton & Co., 2014), 19–20.

About the Author



Joel Kassiola is Professor of Political Science and a former dean at San Francisco State University. A leading scholar in the field of environmental political theory, he has focused upon China's environmental crisis and proposing Confucian Green Theory. He is the author of *The Death of Industrial Civilization* and *Explorations in Environmental Political Theory*, and a co-editor of *China's Environmental Crisis*. He is currently Co-Editor of the Series on Environmental Politics and Theory for Palgrave Macmillan.

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