



February 2020

Response to Comments

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

Brendan Mackey

Let me begin by thanking everyone who took the time to read my essay "[Toward a Great Ethics Transition: The Earth Charter at Twenty](#)" and send in a written response. I was inspired by the insights shared and encouraged that so many appreciate the significance of the topic being addressed—the central role of ethics to the Great Transition.

Some of the contributions discussed ethics as a noun (as in a statement of ethical values and principles of which the Earth Charter is an example) while others were more concerned with ethics as a verb (the act of engaging in moral reasoning to determine the right or wrong of a given situation). All ethics (noun)—by definition, I would argue—are the products of ethics (verb), and in my essay I was suggesting the value of any ethic is in the moral work it enables us to do. Thus, only by applying the Earth Charter principles in real world situations can we assess their validity and currency. The same is true, of course, for any ethic.

Religion naturally arises in any discussion of ethics. [Mary Evelyn Tucker](#) aptly describes how world religions can be a partner in an ethical transition, although [Richard Falk](#) and [Gwendolyn Hallsmith](#) offer some important cautions. Moreover, the Earth Charter differs from a religious ethic: the Earth Charter principles are not absolute divine commands but prescriptive guidelines for what we need to be thinking about when deciding the right and wrong of a given situation.

As my PhD was in environmental biogeography, and my current research focuses on the role of natural forests in Earth system processes and the impacts on them of human commercial activities, I was particularly pleased to read the contributions highlighting the co-evolutionary relationship humans have with the greater community of life and Earth (e.g., those of [J. Baird](#)

[Callicott](#) and [Jeremy Lent](#)). The current climate change emergency—the result of burning fossil fuel for energy, along with deforestation and degradation—illustrates this with a growing intensity. And let us not forget that the coronavirus health emergency is also a product of the co-evolutionary relationships between humans, other species, and planetary environmental conditions. Nowhere is our human hubris more apparent than in thinking our culture and technology have enabled us to step outside evolutionary processes and to be immune from the consequences of natural selection. Humanity's future and survival is very much tied to the health of our planet. And for this reason, I argue the Great Transition needs an ethic which is an Earth ethic.

[Kathryn Sikkink](#) noted the failure of the Earth Charter to achieve a level of recognition and hard law success comparable to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That was not for lack of trying, as [Steven Rockefeller](#) reminds us. Drafters and supporters of the Earth Charter had attempted to have it recognized in the Johannesburg Declaration, the main outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002; however, a reference to the Earth Charter in the draft negotiating text was removed at the final hour. At least one national government allegedly objected to principle 16c, i.e., “Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration,” on the basis that they reserved the right to pre-emptive military action and interventions that require an offensive capability. This anecdote serves to remind us of the powerful hold individual states and military interests retain over international relations and the challenge the military-industrial complex presents to the Great Transition, a point alluded to by [Luis Cabrera](#).

The Earth Charter, however, has been endorsed by UNESCO, including adoption of a resolution at the recent Fortieth General Conference of UNESCO that reaffirmed the importance of the Earth Charter as an ethical framework for sustainable development and encouraged Member States to use the Earth Charter in the processes of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), in particular in the implementation of the new [ESD implementation framework](#) for 2030. This motion was presented by the Government of Mexico with the support of Jordan to the 207th Executive Board of UNESCO in October 2019.

A number of contributors made the case for one or other philosophical “grundnorm” upon which a truly sustainable society could be based, with some arguing that the Earth Charter remains tied to a

system of norms that is inherently incapable of supporting the Great Transition. This is an important point because, among other things, it raises the question of whether a society can only undertake a Great Transition if everyone agrees upon the moral reasoning behind a given value statement and principle. A presupposition of the Earth Charter drafting process was that people could agree on an ethical principle for different moral reasonings. As [Joel Kassiola](#) argues, we can only show that in practice through discussion and debate.

Principle 15 provides an illustrative case study for this difficulty: “Treat all living beings with respect and consideration. a. Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering. b. Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering. c. Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.”

This set of principles was the result of a dialogue involving Inuit and other indigenous peoples for whom hunting and eating wild animals is both a customary practice and a practical necessity; people of faith for whom the taking of animal life is to be avoided; animal rights proponents concerned with the welfare of individual animals whether in the wild, kept as companions, or used commercially. All these groups had different perspectives for why they care about how people treat animals but could agree on the Earth Charter text for principle 15. This was the case for many of the Earth Charter principles where common ground was found among a diversity of groups and communities despite their differing cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies.

However, a limitation of finding common ground is that some—or many—can find themselves caught in a compromising framing. For example, vegetarians and vegans, while agreeing with the intent of Earth Charter Principle 15 in helping address animal suffering, may remain highly critical of these same principles on the basis they serve to validate and reinforce the status quo rather than promote a more radical approach to redefining human-animal relations. Similar criticisms were made by contributors to this dialogue on the basis that a radical re-envisioning is needed of our economic system beyond that given by the Earth Charter ([Kavita Byrd](#), [Ian Angus](#)). A basic issue our GTI ethics dialogue therefore raises for me is whether we can have a Great Transition based on finding common ground among the moral material we currently have to work with or whether fundamentally new ethical ground needs to be tilled. Where the latter are needed, cultivating such deeper drivers requires fundamentally new ways of thinking ([Olivia Bina](#), [Roger Gottlieb](#)).

A number of the contributions (e.g., [Roz Savage](#), [Gwendolyn Hallsmith](#), [Kavita Byrd](#)) argued that we—as in the royal we who seek the Great Transition—are in sufficient agreement about the moral compass that guides us that we can put aside any further ethical dialogue and starting rolling up our sleeves and get to work building the new economic and governance systems that we know are needed. I could not agree more about the need for action, but we cannot assume that we all share the same ends and the means to achieve them.

In this regard, I very much support among [Ron Engel's](#) nine elements for building a movement capable of providing a strong ethical foundation for the Great Transition, especially, a diagnosis of the geopolitical and economic causes of our present plight and the agencies responsible for it; a strategy for mobilizing political will for confronting these agencies and replacing them with alternative forms of democratic governance; and a covenanted, democratic organizational structure for the movement with the leadership and other resources necessary to advance its influence in all parts of the world.

I remain hopeful that despite its limitations from articulating an ethic based on finding common ground, and the shortcomings arising from being a document of its time, the Earth Charter can still play a role in helping build a strong ethical foundation for the Great Transition.

About the Author



Brendan Mackey is Professor and Director of the Climate Change Response Program at Griffith University, Queensland Australia. He is currently a Coordinating Lead Author for the 6th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

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