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Beyond Anthropocentric Solidarity Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

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To accomplish a Great Transition of any kind would require an unprecedented measure of solidarity among countries, regions, cultures, communities, and individuals. The question to what extent such solidarity could be considered possible is therefore of existential importance. Richard Falk offered an insightful [exploration](#) of what forms and extents of solidarity might be possible, feasible, desirable, and—most importantly—necessary. He formulates the goal as developing a binding and overriding ethos of “responsible anthropocentrism” that does not eliminate cultural differences but that complements them “with a sense of commonality while sustaining their separate and distinctive identities.”

This post has two main objectives: to complement Richard Falk’s outline with some additional considerations on feasibility and to address the question to what extent an anthropocentric ethic can adequately support a Great Transition in principle.

The question of feasibility focuses on necessary contextual conditions and on humanity’s intrinsic capabilities. Regarding the former, historical precedents highlight the powerful influence of a shared challenge or adversary. Short of an approaching sizable asteroid, a pandemic serves well—or so one might have thought. Falk, like others, pointed out the overwhelming failure of humanity to effectively cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating woefully low dispositions towards solidarity.¹ Perhaps a more devastating pandemic would have elicited more solidarity in terms of responsiveness, containment, administrative commitment, and civil discipline. At any rate, a Great Transition necessitates that we abandon the coveted ideal of the pre-crisis “normal,” that we deliberately turn away from counterproductive practices and strive in solidarity for

radically new ways of living in the spirit of Deep Adaptation.² A challenge capable of enforcing that degree of solidarity would need to be much more severe and obvious than COVID ever was.

At the center of the quest for a Transition lies necessarily the reduction of our collective impact on the Earth, currently exceeding sustainable levels by about seventy percent.³ For a global population of near eight billion, that would entail significant reductions in most people's standards of life, even if we succeeded in mitigating economic inequality.⁴ A reduction in our global population seems even less considerable. Without such reductions, however, no sustainable future is possible, because the manifestations of our ecological overshoot (climate change, other effects of pollution, resource scarcity, biodiversity loss, ecological deterioration, etc.) would remain unaddressed.

To what extent could global solidarity possibly empower humanity to accomplish such radical changes? Could any extent of cultural learning, sociopolitical empowerment, or humanistic empathy get us even close? Falk's ethos of "responsible anthropocentrism," or any form of "patriotism for humanity," may help in the case of a pandemic, but its exclusive focus on *Homo sapiens* precludes any substantial progress on the wider predicaments arising from our unsustainable impact on the Earth.

Anthropocentrism in its various forms creates perceptual and moral barriers that prevent people from reflecting about human reproduction and consumption in terms that are non-selfish.⁵ Indeed, the self-proclaimed anthropocentric ideal of human flourishing can never be reached without a genuine concern for the flourishing of other life forms for their own sake. No species can exist, let alone flourish, independently from other species. But because our understanding of our dependencies remains forever incomplete, imparting only instrumental worth on non-human life forms neither guarantees our sustainable environmental security, nor relieves our loneliness as "the only species that truly matters." This is how Lewis Perelman came to assert that "ecology has taken two of the most fundamental premises of Western culture—the individual right of property and the political right of sovereignty—and blasted them at the root. In fact, ecology pulled the foundation out from under the whole elaborate superstructure of the Western notion of 'human rights.'"⁶

Moreover, the anthropocentric goal of human flourishing itself remains ill-defined, as neither total utility nor average utility satisfies all the anthropocentrists' preferences. As prospects for the Great Transition are concerned, a purely anthropocentric ethos can never quite deliver as much as it promises, even in the eyes of the anthropocentrist.

Anthropocentrism also fails to provide any effective coping mechanism with respect to the Anthropocene predicament. Whether anthropocentrists try ever more desperately to ensure the continued survival of elites under the global crisis, or whether they try to mitigate the crisis through egalitarian policies, will not make much difference in the end. The outcome of the former will be a world dominated by warfare and famine ("[Breakdown](#)"), while the latter leads to a global police state ("[Fortress World](#)"). Both would be overpopulated.

Only an ethic that prioritizes the timely stabilization of ecological support structures and their protection from excessive human demands can help us avoid those outcomes. Its policies would be primarily precautionary and radically ecocentric.⁷ It transforms Falk's suggested ethos into one of "responsible ecocentrism", or a patriotism not for humanity but for Gaia. It extends moral standing to all life forms and to the ecosystems they call home, in a spirit of kinship and shared worth. It would end our gross abuse of non-human nature, carried out under various pretenses of resourcism or mere entertainment. It replaces scientifically untenable and morally bankrupt schemes of so-called "sustainable development" with goals that emphasize humanity managing itself out of solidarity with the Earth.

In the long term, and considering our chronic ignorance of ecological interdependencies, only a naturally evolved biosphere, not free from anthropogenic influences but with humans as an integral and self-managed component, will have the stability and resilience that satisfies the characteristics of a Great Transition. Global solidarity within humanity will not be enough; global solidarity with all life and with the biosphere as a whole will be the condition for our successful transition. Such a profound ethical course change represents a huge undertaking that depends on an unprecedented amount of cultural learning. It encompasses all levels of social organization and calls on the participation of all educators, caregivers, decision-makers, and their supporters in an act of solidarity that surpasses all precedents.⁸ Ultimately, the most important question focuses on extending the circle of solidarity not just around the globe but beyond our species.

Endnotes

1. Richard Horton, *The COVID-19 Catastrophe: What's Gone Wrong and How to Stop It Happening Again* (New York: Polity, 2020); IPPPR (Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response), *Second Report on Progress* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2020), https://theindependentpanel.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Independent-Panel_Second-Report-on-Progress_Final-15-Jan-2021.pdf.
2. Jem Bendell, "Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy," Institute for Leadership and Sustainability, occasional Paper 2, July 7, 2018, University of Cumbria, UK, <https://www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>.
3. Rosamunde Almond, Moonique Grooten, and Tanya Petersen, eds. *Living Planet Report 2020: Bending the Curve of Biodiversity Loss* (Gland, Switzerland: World Wildlife Fund, 2020), https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/LPR20_Full_report.pdf.
4. Gro Harlem Brundtland et al., *Environment and Development Challenges: The Imperative to Act* (Nairobi: United Nations Environment Program, 2012), www.scribd.com/doc/82268857/Blue-Planet-Synthesis-Paper-for-UNEP.
5. I elaborate further in Alexander Lautensach, "The Ethical Basis for Sustainable Human Security: A Place for Anthropocentrism?," *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 6, no. 4 (2009): 437-455.
6. Lewis Perelman, *The Global Mind: Beyond the Limits to Growth* (New York: Mason Charter, 1976), 136.
7. Ted Mosquin and Stan Rowe, "A Manifesto for Earth," *Biodiversity* 5, no. 1 (2004): 3-9, www.ecospherics.net/pages/EarthManifesto.pdf.
8. Alexander Lautensach, *Survival How? Education, Crisis, Diachronicity and the Transition to a Sustainable Future* (Paderborn, Germany: Ferdinand Schoeningh / Brill, 2020)

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