

Ethics for Economics in the Anthropocene

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*We might summarize our present human situation by the simple statement: In the 20th century, the glory of the human has become the desolation of the Earth. And now, the desolation of the Earth is becoming the destiny of the human. From here on, the primary judgment of all human institutions, professions, programs and activities will be determined by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore or foster a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship.*¹

Overview

The human quest for love, power, beauty, happiness, understanding, truth, and the like can be thought of from an ecological perspective: it is enabled by (low entropy) sources of plentiful energy (food, cooking and heating fuel, drought animals, hydro-electric power, fossil fuels, etc.) along with places to put the inevitable (high entropy) waste. As consumption and human numbers have risen, we have ushered in a new era—the Anthropocene—in which we are altering the biogeochemistry of the planet itself, destabilizing climate and influencing co-evolution at the planetary level.² The Anthropocene, itself likely a period of transition, appears to be a regrettable exit from the relatively placid past ten thousand years—the Holocene—a period of climate stability in which “civilization” arose.

Thus we enter the stormy present without an adequate ethical guidance system. In a word, we are lost. The now globally dominant Western culture remains entangled in a project it does not clearly see: the quest to emancipate ourselves from nature; and to assert our superiority over those less blessed—as we Westerners see it—than ourselves. The emancipation project reaches back to the beginnings of agriculture itself and has deep roots in both Biblical and Greek sources—a journey that went further off course in the European Enlightenment.³

¹ Thomas Berry, "Appendix: Reinventing the Human at the Species Level," in *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 117.

² P. J. Crutzen and E. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," *Global Change Newsletter* 41, 1 (2000).

³ M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. J. Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1982).