

The Environmental Crisis:

Metanarrative and the Moral Evolution of Modern Human Society

Overview

The destruction of nature is the consequence not of policy errors that can be remedied by smarter management, better technology, and stricter regulation, but rather of a catastrophic moral failure that demands a radical shift in consciousness. (William Ophuls)

Environmental ethicists have not yet come to terms with the existential implications of ‘catastrophic moral failure’ nor, more importantly, have they provoked radical change by engaging the public consciousness in a transformative way.

There is a tendency among practical people, including ethicists, to tackle clear and concrete environmental problems such as profligate energy consumption and climate change, the ruination of ecosystems and habitat, the precipitous loss of biodiversity, among many other unhappy consequences of irresponsible human behaviour. Without question, this pragmatic approach to change is indispensable but the metrics are clear. To date, all such efforts to manually correct the course of history have been dwarfed by the magnitude and heavy forward momentum of modern industrial society. Business as usual proceeds as usual, and the costs continue to rise.

A major thesis of this book is that material and applied ethics approaches to the environmental crisis cannot succeed without the power of a legitimating discourse – a new metanarrative – which fundamentally changes the ideational landscape of human development. The self-induced peril we now face calls for comprehensive, interpretive, even philosophical sensibilities to tackle and resolve. This book aims to encourage the development of those sensibilities with a sustained focus on the moral dimension of human behavior on Earth.

The concept of ‘metanarrative’ is a recurring theme running through this book. Metanarrative is an overarching story, reflective of and intrinsic to human society on Earth as a whole, which defines the contours of the public mindspace. Tangibly, it’s the dominant set of shared beliefs, values, collective intentions and ethical propensities which give our lives direction and meaning, and which determine the way we manage the relationship between people and planet. And, this suite of social constructs is dynamic; it evolves over time. The manner and direction of its evolution is critical to the moral evolution of human society and to the quest to achieve planetary sustainability.

This book is intended as prologue to a formative, catalytic discourse about the implicate universe we inhabit, about our place on Earth, and about the intractable existential dangers that threaten our tenure here. To accomplish this goal, I take the following approach:

- *Chapter One: The Twin Pillars* The ‘unit of analysis’ for this book is the human population on Earth as a whole. I introduce the premise that the material and transcendental dimensions of our existence are not appropriately balanced.
- *Chapter Two: Today’s Dominant Metanarrative* I outline the provenance of today’s dominant metanarrative and indicate its moral deficiencies.
- *Chapter Three: Global Governance and the New Metanarrative* I provide some basic building blocks for the construction of a new metanarrative.

- *Chapter Four: The New Metanarrative: Some Ontological Considerations* I discuss the ontological foundations of the new metanarrative with a focus on its moral underpinnings.
- *Chapter Five: The New Metanarrative: Agency* In the final chapter, I counterpose the evolution of a new metanarrative with present realities, and offer a fresh interpretation of personal agency.

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