

The Environmental Crisis:

Metanarrative and the Moral Evolution of Modern Human Society

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Stephen J. Purdey

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Chapter 1

THE TWIN PILLARS

There's no question that we humans are an extraordinary species. Unbothered by competition or predation, unconstrained by geography, endlessly adaptable to climate, seasons and available foods, it isn't surprising that, in our growing numbers, we have come to physically dominate the entire planetary resource base. Our rapid rise to supremacy was spurred by a distinctive morphology and accelerated by another unique genetic advantage – an elite cognitive endowment that elevated us to unprecedented levels of perception, reason and foresight with which we easily outranked and outperformed all other species. From these exceptional characteristics, both physical and intellectual, springs our ability, and perceived right, to do anything, to be anything, and to freely imagine a plentiful future in which all needs will be met, all wants satisfied.

And yet in spite of – or perhaps, as we shall see, because of – our exceptional capabilities we now find ourselves on the cusp of monumental changes which may dash those headstrong aspirations. Our global reach and brash enthusiasm have imposed, inadvertently or otherwise, major perturbations on land, air and water setting in motion pervasive, long-lasting changes to how Earth works. So massive have these cumulative disturbances to the planet been that we are now entering a new geological interval, marking an end to the familiar environmental stability of the preceding 12000 years. The aptly named Anthropocene epoch¹, displacing the earlier Holocene during which humanity rose to pre-eminence among all species, acknowledges (albeit as a self-portrait) the dominion of human life on Earth, and it underscores the fact that we have wilfully taken ownership of our own destiny. It promises, however, no assurance whatever that we have the insight, the competence or the courage to manage that destiny, or to guarantee a future which supports even the barest of necessities. We have arrived, in other words, at a crucial historical juncture which counterposes spectacular success with the real possibility of equally spectacular failure; a juncture which, without due care, will see conceit turn quickly to tragedy.

¹ As of June 2019 the International Commission on Stratigraphy has not formally approved this term as a sub-division of geological time, though it is by now in common usage across several disciplines.

The truth of the matter is that our material success as a species has not been matched by an equally robust evolution of empathic care for our natural surroundings, by a reflexive appreciation of our own power and limitations, or by an emergent sense of adult responsibility. This imbalance obscures the fact that we are both Earthbound and transcendental beings, alive to the mysteries of the universe yet grounded in a material physicality. The latter provides a stream of tangible benefits necessary for life and prosperity; the former adds the possibility of evaluation, betterment and purpose to the human experience. These two features of our existence should be harmonious, evolving together, forming the twin pillars of a resilient human community on Earth – but our extravagant success has made us arrogant, imperiously dismissing any notion of accountability to each other, to the planet, or to a loftier reality. It will be a key objective of this book to restore a balanced reciprocity between these two pillars, between the material and non-material worlds inhabited by individual people, and by human society writ large.

The process of reconciliation begins necessarily by acknowledging the obvious, that is, by facing directly the physical damage we have done to Earth's biosphere, the extremity of which now threatens our lives. We've altered the composition of the atmosphere and ocean with callow disregard for and little comprehension of the consequences. Ice fields, fresh water systems, soils, forest cover, species habitat, nutrient cycles and much more have all proven vulnerable to clumsy human interventions, interventions which have now provoked a precipitous degradation of the planetary biosphere and a rising danger to our long-term well-being. This frank assessment foregrounds the material aspect of that threat – but it simultaneously alerts us to the ideational dimension of our relationship with the planet, now conspicuous as an uneasy apprehension rippling around the world that something is amiss, that danger is nearby, that our families and futures are not safe. Impelled by persistent media coverage of environmental damage, and often by the personal experience of it, this apprehension is expressed in a plethora of popular and professional publications, in governmental and private sector initiatives, and in widespread public demonstrations, all intended to emphasize and advocate solutions for what is generally (but by no means exclusively) perceived to be a global environmental crisis.

Solutions rising from public nervousness circle predominantly around core issues of mitigation and adaptation; typically, they address the practical need to lessen our environmental impact and

adapt to changes already upon us. These are obviously important but a growing sub-set of activists and analysts are now beginning to focus less on the nuts and bolts of remediation and more on the ideational underpinnings of our current environmental predicament. Here we find, for example, efforts to uncover hegemonic worldviews which inform and legitimize humanity's disruptive relationship with Earth, and to expose the cultural narratives which convey those views through time and space. The objective of this effort is to better understand the provenance and social impact of these inappropriate beliefs, values and stories, and to supplant them with a public mindset more conducive to planetary sustainability.

Worldviews, narratives and the like are often referred to as forms of 'discourse' in the academic literature. Important as these are, however, they're often regarded as too ephemeral to grapple with, too far removed from the actual labour of environmental protection. Practical people have chosen instead to tackle tangible problems, working to mitigate the worst effects of profligate energy consumption and climate change, of global industrialism and pollution, of misbegotten wealth, widespread poverty and human dereliction. But this point of view falls prey to the problem identified at the beginning, namely that the balance between our transcendental and material inclinations has been lost, with too much emphasis on the latter. Without question, the pragmatic, hands-on approach to change is indispensable but the metrics are abundantly 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. The practical/material approach cannot succeed without the power of a new discourse which will fundamentally change the ideational landscape of human development.

The Form and Power of Discourse

'Discourse' isn't an academic topic reserved for professional social scientists. It's a powerful, generative social force that influences what we believe to be true and what we understand to be right. Discourse is the tacit conversation we have among ourselves about ourselves and about our place in the world, and in that sense it informs and is formative of social relations. It's "a shared way of apprehending the world" resting on a set of assumptions, judgements and contentions,²

² John S. Dryzec, *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.8.

or, put differently, “a matrix of social practices that gives meaning to the way that people understand themselves and their behaviour. A discourse ... generates the categories of meaning by which reality can be understood and explained.”³ A conversation among people about the performance of their local economy, for example, may be termed a ‘capitalist discourse’ insofar as that conversation identifies roles (employers and employees), expectations (money for service) and norms (fair competition) associated with profit-oriented economic behaviour. A common understanding among participants in the conversation facilitates communication between them, which in turn increases the incentive for others to adopt it as well. A discourse, in this way, is constitutive of social relations and, more profoundly, of a shared sense of meaning about the world around.

A discourse may be comprehended under a variety of names – a conversation, an ideology, a cosmology, a social episteme, a secular religion, an ideational superstructure or a metanarrative – and I’ll have occasion to refer to all of these from time to time. However, for the sake of simplicity and clarity, I’ll prefer the term ‘metanarrative’ in this book, by which I mean an overarching story reflective of and intrinsic to human society on Earth as a whole, and which defines the contours of the public mindscape. It’s no exaggeration to assert at the outset that a metanarrative is, in effect, the command-and-control function for our collective behaviour. As well as shaping social relations and expressing the aspirations we share, metanarrative informs the choices we make and, ultimately, determines how we manage the relationship between people and planet. Of particular importance in the present context, this suite of social constructs is also dynamic; it evolves over time. The manner and direction of that evolution is critical not only to the quest to achieve planetary sustainability, but to the moral bearing of human society as well.

One or Many?

By using inclusive words such as ‘we’ and ‘our’ in the foregoing I have referred to our species on Earth as a singular entity. This may seem inappropriate, or simply wrong. It’s quite clear, after all, that multiple civilizations and communities around the world exhibit unique histories, cultures and varieties of economic and political systems which present in their totality a

³ Jim George, *Discourse of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994, pp.29-30.

kaleidoscopic image of human society, the diversity of which is one of its most important features. And it seems equally clear that multiple narratives about life on Earth co-exist right now, narratives about money and power, about democracy and human rights, about feminism, environmentalism, the information revolution, and of course about religion and various preferred ways of being and personal living. To overlook this rich diversity is to do a disservice to the manifold complexities of human inventiveness and adaptive resilience.

On the other hand, however, highlighting diversity can obscure the general form, function and character of the whole which comprises those various parts; one can lose the forest for the trees, to employ a familiar aphorism. The diversity lens brings to focus a medley of human social projects, and along with that a complicated matrix of dynamic relationships among those projects. By gathering all these elements together, however, the whole point of view brings to light features which are unique to the aggregated totality, such as the fact that one incumbent story – one *meta*-narrative – covertly rules the contemporary mindscape; and that our species in its entirety is embedded in a planet-wide social-ecological system which may or may not evolve according to our wishes and requirements. On this account, it's useful, even necessary, to posit a singular entity called 'human society' which now finds itself entangled in a self-induced existential struggle on one indivisible planet.

In principle, of course, we can enjoy the benefits of both unity *and* diversity. There's no reason to suppose that communitarian values can't be respected within a cosmopolitan framework, no reason why differences can't flourish within a shared ethic of sufficiency. There's no reason why micro-variability can't be conjoined with macro-stability expressed in a new metanarrative about the long-term relationship between Earth and us. No reason in principle, that is, but in practice the balance between unity and diversity, between parts and the whole, is very hard to find and to maintain. The rights and behaviour of a citizen living freely among others, for example, may be constrained by an invisible social structure which privileges community solidarity, shared values and the pursuit of common goals. The resultant tension between individual freedom of choice and public responsibility sets up a problematic relationship between 'the one and the many' the resolution of which has challenged philosophers for millennia.

No such tension exists in the material world of nature. Individual plants and animals live in nested webs of ever larger and more complex ecosystems, a hierarchy of wholes which

simultaneously enables and constrains opportunities to thrive by efficiently transferring information and energy among component parts. The vitality of the total global ecosystem is enlivened by the constant interplay of competition and cooperation among those parts, and the ensuing dynamic balance forged by nature sets the stage for individual lives and species to flourish as best they can. The success of ecosystems to strike a balance between diversity and unity has inspired the hope that human social systems might be able to imitate that success by utilizing the principle of ‘biomimicry.’⁴ Reminiscent of Aldo Leopold’s land ethic and Jim Cheney’s discussion of bioregionalism,⁵ the aspiration to imitate nature is entirely sensible and could lead to the discovery of important lessons for human survival.

Hopeful though this may be, however, it ignores the fact that nested social structures are products of the human imagination not necessarily beholden to nature’s template. For us, the embedding of difference in a functional whole is a matter of choice; we may or may not choose to do it. And, moreover, because the character of interlaced social systems is informed if not wholly determined by the dominant stories of the day, we may or may not do it well. Stories which tout individual prowess, racial purity or disdain for the ‘other,’ for example, may not be suited to the successful accommodation of difference. It’s important to acknowledge that narratives, especially metanarratives, are not intrinsically or necessarily benign.

Examples in human history of positive transformative change instigated by a clash of foundational ideas are rare. The defeat of apartheid and the (nominal) end of slavery comes to mind. Likewise, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was a contest of strength, but it was also an argument about the relative merits of capitalist and communist socio-economic systems. Each was advertised to better serve the common good, and each was offered to the world as the normative core around which global governance should evolve. Capitalist ideology won that argument to the dismay of many modern critics who now see it as a root cause of environmental degradation. Drawing on yet another episode of transformative change in history, the Protestant Reformation offers a unique case study for radical change. In 1517 Martin Luther tacked his 95 Theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, launching a frontal assault on certain practices (especially indulgences) of the Roman Catholic Church. The

⁴ Coined by Janine Benyus. See biomimicry.org for details.

⁵ Jim Cheney, ‘Postmodern environmental ethics: ethics as bioregional narrative’, *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 11, Summer 1989, pp.117-34.

content of the theses was of course not germane to planetary sustainability, but nonetheless the effect of this assault was revolutionary. With the help of the printing press – a broadcast innovation not unlike social media in today’s world – the Protestant movement was a game-changer. That the power of the Church and Catholic dogma during the Holy Roman Empire could be challenged, if not toppled, by an opposing set of beliefs speaks clearly to the kind of ideational battle for which the new global narrative must be fully prepared.

The clash of contrary ideas, especially those contending for metanarrative status, is inevitably jarring, even dangerous. Recall that the Reformation stoked violent religious conflict across Europe, culminating in the Thirty Years’ War. Recall also that Luther’s failure to convert European Jews to Christianity (the failure of one narrative to subsume another) prompted him to adopt a most appalling kind of anti-Semitism which, centuries later, was called upon to inform and legitimize the National Socialist movement in Nazi Germany.⁶ This is all to say that words, beliefs, shared commitments and new stories are tremendously powerful phenomena, and dominant stories always carry the risk of oppression. One need only think of *lebensraum*, the innumerable atrocities committed in the name of religion, or, looking forward, the possible rise of global environmental eco-fascism, a forcible claim to the right to mete out scarce resources in the name of sustainability. To avoid these outcomes, the new metanarrative many of us anticipate must be founded on the most secure moral footing. This aspiration, however, has not yet been realized. Deep currents of habitual behaviour in modern human society militate against the evolution of a new metanarrative, even as they spotlight the need for it. One such current is the moveable feast called postmodernism.

Narration in Modern Culture

Jean-François Lyotard popularized the term postmodernism with a seminal book published in 1979. “I define *postmodernism*,” he said, “as incredulity toward metanarratives.”⁷ Primarily a product of Western civilization but representative of a much wider constituency, Lyotard argued that the postmodern condition speaks to a loss of faith in modernity – that is, to a rejection of the metanarrative of progress, broadly defined in terms of the ascent of Enlightenment rationality,

⁶ Christopher J. Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (trans.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1979], p.xxiv. Original italics.

the promised emancipation of the world's exploited, and the creation of wealth. Instead of these felicitous outcomes, we've seen two world wars, the rise of a transnational elite which controls the levers of political and economic power, radical economic disparities separating North and South, the increasingly heavy influence of technology over everyday lives and, not least, the spectre of a global environmental crisis. For postmodernists, the lure of 'prosperity for all' is vacuous, a nominal sheen on a false and misleading story. By rejecting it they bluntly reject any metanarrative which purports to identify a common goal, a transcendent truth, or a universalizing perspective.

The grand narrative of progress has not been dismissed across the board, of course.⁸ It's still promulgated by those who tout its benefits, especially political leaders whose electoral success depends upon it, by those who aspire to wealth and power, those who enjoy conspicuous consumption on a massive scale, and also by ordinary people who yearn hopefully for a better, more affluent lifestyle and a prosperous future ahead. The origins of the broad and very deep commitment to the metanarrative of 'progress and prosperity' will be more closely examined in the next chapter.

The programmatic pursuit of progress and prosperity is certainly vulnerable to the criticisms levied above. It also inadvertently set the stage for a postmodern rejoinder by lionizing individual accomplishments, and by shattering the continuous flow of time into momentary microbits. Modernity is characterized by speed, by the onrush of new events, by the flickering ephemera of television, by smart-phones and computers all of which create a simulated, surrogate reality and a discontinuous social experience. Space has been compressed by ease of travel and the virtual experience of distant places. Continuity with the past is lost, the sense of geographic place is compromised, the future is unpredictable and the only timeless law is the disconcerting notion that only change is constant.

Richard Kearney makes this important observation regarding the impact of the information revolution on cultural continuity:

⁸ On this see Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, New York: Penguin Books, 2018.

The shared *experience* of traditional communities, based upon the transmission of inherited stories, myths, legends, tales, lore, from generation to generation, is being replaced ... by the more anonymous and instantaneous transmission of *information*. This signals the end of cultural memory with its specific qualities of continuity, authenticity, accumulated depth and wisdom, and the beginning of an electronically interconnected network – the so-called global village.⁹

Access to information and the attendant tools of dissemination is undoubtedly important and maybe, as Kearney says, the information revolution contains “the seeds of a new universalism transcending the tribal divisions and differences of traditional national cultures.”¹⁰ In the meantime, however, we’re still living in “a society of spectacle and pseudo-events, a society in which we seem to be having difficulty distinguishing between narratives which are genuine or fake, enabling or disabling, better or worse.”¹¹

Arran Gare adds that, in this turbulent context,

[P]eople have been deprived of fixed reference points by which they previously oriented themselves ... In a postmodern world there is no place for the slow struggle to find and live one’s destiny which is the core of narratives ... With the rise of electronic media, the value of literacy itself is being brought into question.¹²

It’s ironic that the shattering of time and space has been assimilated by postmodernists even as the grand narrative of progress itself has been rejected as dysfunctional. Difference and individuality are celebrated and fragments of life are re-purposed as nodes of personal proprietorship; each of us becomes the locus of our own experience and the creator of our own reality. Optimistically, Gare sees in this the possibility of a postmodern cosmology which, drawing on Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy, privileges becoming over being. What this means is that postmodernists should (and do) avoid the reification of abstract entities – no absolute truths or principles, no Platonic forms, no teleological tendency to moral evolution or

⁹ Richard Kearney, *The Crisis of Narration in Contemporary Culture*, *METAPHILOSOPHY*, Vol.28, No. 3, July 1997, p.184. Original italics.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.184.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.183.

¹² Arran E. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, New York: Routledge, 1995.

maturation – in favour of a personal process of becoming understood as an exercise in immanent- or self-creativity. In this way, “life itself is lived as an inchoate narrative”¹³ and from the interplay of diverse stories a multi-dimensional narrative might arise in which individuals “experience themselves as processes of becoming actively participating in the becoming of the world.”¹⁴ This is actually an attractive cosmology which anticipates the concluding chapter of this book, with the important difference that postmodernists struggle to find virtue in an atomized world, whereas I will suggest that personal agency can benefit from (and partake in) the ‘reification of abstract entities’ mentioned above, a process which offers a more useful and morally sound platform for (r)evolutionary change.

Notwithstanding this friendly reading by Gare, Foucauldian post-structuralism (a leading intellectual voice of postmodernism)¹⁵ insists that narratives of any kind, especially metanarratives, are really a form of false consciousness and consensus, universalizing tendencies the covert objective of which is to suppress, not encourage, difference and individuality. History proceeds from domination to domination, each episode driven by competition for the hearts and minds of people. At pivotal junctures when discourses clash, the contest is resolved and new modes of normalization are imposed only to the degree that coercion is effective and consent is temporarily achieved. On this view fragmentation is an inevitable and irreconcilable consequence of the grand narrative of progress even as it has become an assimilated feature of an individualistic lifestyle. Because this interpretation tends to supersede Gare’s more forward-looking opinion, postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon is commonly regarded as self-consciously reclusive, tending not to unite people but divide them. In that sense it’s not a powerful political force, nor does it offer a coherent methodology for understanding how to achieve any kind of consensus regarding the environmental crisis.

Paradoxically, another major current of habitual behaviour in modern culture which militates against narration pulls in the opposite direction. Unlike postmodernism, positivism is a prevalent mode of discovery around the world today and a powerful political force. It relies upon sensory experience and embraces rationality as an instrument to gain knowledge and to achieve control

¹³ Ibid., p.137.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.155.

¹⁵ See for example Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, genealogy, history” in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1986.

over the natural world for the benefit of humanity. It seeks objective and timeless laws via observation, measurement and a quantitative methodology. Inasmuch as human affairs are part of the natural order, these too are amenable to positivist inquiry without any needful reference to normative (immaterial) considerations. Because this approach is widely believed to be progressive and, ultimately, capable of solving most worldly problems effectively and efficiently, it neatly combines nomological determinism with an optimistic view of the future.

Positivism is a product of Enlightenment thinking, developed canonically by Auguste Comte in the early nineteenth century; it validates the methodological and ontological foundations upon which most science today is taught and practiced, and its rewards have been obvious and plentiful. It has, on the other hand, been roundly criticized by many for rejecting as irrelevant anything unseen and immaterial, a rejection which has baffled sociologists and critical theorists alike. The Frankfurt School, for example, has seriously challenged the notion of rationality, concluding that most humans are anything but, and has disparaged the entire movement of empirical positivism as an ideology – as ‘scientism’ which inappropriately privileges a materialist belief system over breadth of understanding and common sense. Critics also warn of the loss of aesthetics and morality, and decry the ‘disenchantment’ of nature which makes Earth vulnerable to the instrumental aggression of practical reason. By relying solely on empirical data and rejecting as fanciful metaphysics, theism, introspection and intuition, critical theorists such as Horkheimer, Adorno and many others argue that positivism creates a world in which narrative has no role to play. In the following section I briefly introduce the more amenable interpretive methodology deployed in this book.

Process and Methodology

An important feature of the positivist mode of knowledge acquisition is its separation of subject from object, and its quest for universal or ahistorical laws of social science. Its task is to discover regularities in human activity, to develop theories that explain why those regularities hold under certain objective conditions, and to test those theories with reference to empirical evidence. In contrast, an interpretivist account of human behaviour is concerned to explore and understand reasons for actions that derive from sets of interests which are shaped by characteristics of personal or social identity. It’s a search for meaning, not data.

Like interests and identities, reasons for action are thoroughly embedded in social relations, often taking the form of shared beliefs which guide and legitimize behaviour. These beliefs or, more broadly, collectively held convictions and expectations, are deemed ‘social facts’ – facts with real causal power – but their unobservability, historical contingency and evolution over time all conceal their presence from empirical inquiry. Nonetheless, they’re important because they render human experience meaningful. “Narrative meaning”, says Donald E. Polkinghorne, “functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units.”¹⁶

Drawing on Polkinghorne’s work, John Ruggie refers to this process as narrative explanation:

The narrative explanatory protocol comprises two ‘orders’ of information: the descriptive and the configurative. The first simply links ‘events’ along a temporal dimension . . . The second organizes these descriptive statements into an interpretive ‘gestalt’ or ‘coherence structure’. These operations rest on . . . the successive adjusting of a conjectured ordering scheme to the available facts [which] allow them to be grasped together as parts of one story . . . [which is] believable to others looking at the same events.¹⁷

This methodological model will be deployed in chapter 2 in which I trace the historical evolution of today’s dominant metanarrative. Events will be described and linked along a temporal dimension. The interpretation of those events as the evolution of a metanarrative is, in effect, the configurative element of the narration that bonds events together as one story which unfolds during the span of one historical era, and which may be extrapolated into the future.

The question of validation criteria is pertinent. Ruggie admits that narrative forms of explanation may seem to be “arbitrary, subjective and soft”¹⁸ compared to the deductive-nomological (law-seeking) explanatory scheme, but argues nonetheless that modes of epistemology and methodology must somehow be commensurate with the ontological phenomenon at issue. Though its impact on the environment may be palpable, metanarrative itself is ontologically elusive; it’s a belief system and set of ethical propensities the existence of which is not possible

¹⁶ Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, p.11.

¹⁷ John G. Ruggie, ‘Epistemology, Ontology and the Study of International Regimes,’ in J. G. Ruggie, (ed.), *Constructing the World Polity: Essays on International institutionalization*, London: Routledge, 1998, p.94.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.94

to categorically affirm in a positivist moment of truth as correspondence. Alternative validation criteria of the interpretive mode must therefore include such elements as coherence and credibility, derived from a reasonable number of relevant events along the storyline and logical linkages among them; conformity with empirical evidence within the context of the story; the presence of key structural elements in the narration, such as agents, motives and goals; and the progressiveness of meanings exposed, conclusions reached, or other contributions made to the inventory of human knowledge.

Narrative is susceptible to an interpretive methodology that is sensitive to deeply implicit socio-cultural conditions which can shape individual behaviour and legitimize public policy. The taken-for-granted status of today's dominant metanarrative can be attributed in large part to its abstract character and its dissociation from the material world. These features allow it to take on any shape or proportion and, I will show in chapter 2, also allow it to display the appealing but ultimately illusory appearance of a social, political, economic and environmental panacea.

For better or worse, narrative provides the foundation of social normalcy and as such it's structural in nature. But, like the realm of meaning itself, it's also a dynamic system which is extrapolated by social forces through time and space, and which evolves through the constant and active interplay of new ideas. As with any conversation, its mood, content and direction can change when new or contrary ideas are interjected and engaged. Given the pervasiveness and deep roots of the incumbent metanarrative these engagements will inevitably be disruptive and jarring but, when ideas clash, when stories collide, the result is a new amalgam of beliefs and values, and a new direction forward. The shared process of creating a new metanarrative will be uniquely challenging – historically, intellectually, morally – but, by equal measure, profoundly stimulating as it calls to question the deepest meaning of our species' tenure on Earth.

Can the advancement of a new metanarrative really help enable a rapid transition to planetary sustainability? The agency problem is daunting, and responses to it are often framed in pragmatic terms – how can individuals be educated and motivated, how can a popular movement be started and scaled up, what kind of infrastructure can support an upwelling of public concern and participation, and so forth. Prevailing wisdom suggests that citizen-led counter-hegemonic activism will, in due course, reach a critical mass which will overwhelm dysfunctional narratives and radically reform existing institutions, practices and attitudes. This expectation, however, is

countermanded by the reality that the business-as-usual paradigm still dominates the international agenda. Policy-makers and captains of industry around the world are seized of the belief that no radical change is required; that adjustments at the margins within the dominant paradigm will suffice; that our current systems of governance are adequate to the task of creating a viable future. Normalized, legitimized and institutionalized, the heavy forward momentum of modern industrial society is formidable.

Instead of taking a utilitarian approach, it may be that the driving energy for a truly transformative movement can be found in the creative humanities. People everywhere respond intuitively to stories, metaphors and allegories that touch their lives, so morally sensitized emotional engagement presented in a literary (as opposed to an academic, technical or pragmatic) format might open a more effective approach to the agency problem. If, as many of us believe, we are facing truly existential peril then a tectonic shift of the public mindscape toward the emotional, the metaphysical and the moral might be the change we're looking for. A popularized dialectic which pits epitaph against epiphany, if it successfully penetrated the public consciousness, could have significant motive power.