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• Environmental Ethics and Land Management  
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ENVR E-120

<http://courses.dce.harvard.edu/~envre120>

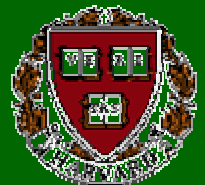
Selected Writers on Environmental Ethics

Timothy C. Weiskel

Session 4 – Part 1

13 October 2005

Harvard University Extension School  
Fall Semester 2005

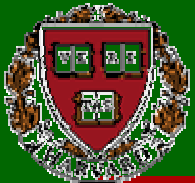


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As you will recall we began this course by emphasizing that all ethics exist in a particular cosmic and geological context.

*"Civilizations exist by geological consent, subject to change without notice."*

*Will Durant*



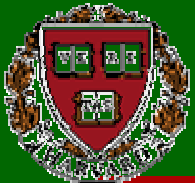
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Sometimes the broader cosmic and geological events intrude abruptly upon our world of ethical reasoning...

Our “lived experience” in the broader cosmic and geological setting shapes our sense of ethics – our collective sense of what *ought to be* done.

Consider, for example,

*Flood Insurance – Need for National Flood Policy.*



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# The First Step in Overcoming Our 'Neolithic Ethnocentrism' is to Recognize the *Implicit Theories in our Ethical Discourse*

Our (common) Theory of **Community**

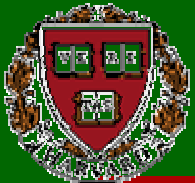
Our (common) Theory of **System**

Our (common) Theory of **Authority**

Our (common) Theory of **Change**

Our (common) Theory of **Agency**

Our (common) Theory of **Time**



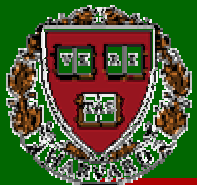
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## Analysis of implicit theories leads to understanding of the hierarchy of values = *Worldview*

In analyzing the implicit theories behind the moral discourse we can arrive at an understanding of how these theories combine to provide a *hierarchy of valuation* for any individual or group, enabling it to make choices, judge right from wrong and establish policy.

Some things are said to be *more important* than others or they are attended to *first*. Some things are thought to be self-evident or true beyond any need for proof.

A shorthand way of referring to these different hierarchies of valuation is to speak of different “*Worldviews.*”



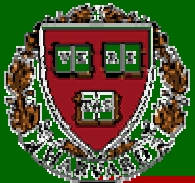
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## Where do worldviews come from?

Worldviews emerge from the collective, historical experience of an econiche over time.

They represent the sum total of the implicit theories (of community, system, change, etc.) which have proved credible and useful over time in a given community.

The greater the stability and continuity of the social formation, the greater the coherence of its worldview.

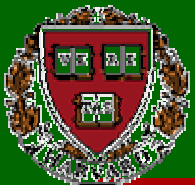


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## Do Worldviews change with new knowledge? Sometimes yes... Sometimes no...

The greater the amount of change, instability or transformation in a society the greater the challenge to a particular worldview.

BUT although worldviews may be challenged, they do not necessarily change. On the contrary, they may resist change and reassert what they perceive to be their fundamental tenets of belief all the more vehemently. Fundamentalisms everywhere arise as a means of resisting change where that change challenges a received worldview.



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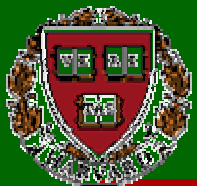
## Worldviews not ‘bothered’ by mere facts...

Thus, worldviews are sometimes abandoned -- but not often and not easily. Both extended time, protracted debate and shifts in social power are required for this to happen.

In short, worldviews change much more slowly than knowledge systems – and, sometimes, not at all.

Knowledge systems can change radically in one generation with new kinds of evidence, but worldviews and the beliefs associated with them lag far behind any new discovery of mere facts.

This is especially true in societies characterized by partial and specialized literacy.





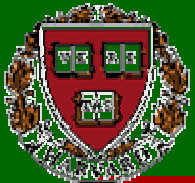
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## Reality is often denied in defense of the self-affirming features of a worldview....

In societies characterized by partial, specialized or restricted literacy a great deal of intellectual energy is always devoted to *denying* the importance of new data and new facts.

Evidence for new phenomena needs to be ‘squared’ with the expectations for what constitutes data in the existing texts. If the new phenomena does not conform to what is expected, they are often rejected and their importance is denied.

Consider the evolution of the worldview in grain-based agricultural societies of the “ancient” Near East....



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# Assumptions that are ‘built in’ to ‘Neolithic Ethnocentrism’ [and ruled out...]

- Growth is “natural.” [what else? so is death?]
- Growth is “good.” [always? can it be “bad?”]
- More is better. [always true? are there limits?]
- Accumulation is possible therefore both necessary *and* virtuous. [should there be limits on accumulation?]
- Wealth embodies success and [Divine] favor.
  - [Monotheistic variant...] Natural process is under supreme Divine control. [really? ‘Acts of God’?]
  - *some* humans are entrusted as ‘stewards’ or ‘*chosen*’ with a divine mission or privileged roles as agents. [who gets to choose the ‘chosen?’]



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“Western” religions emerge abruptly within the Middle East in a comparatively short time frame...

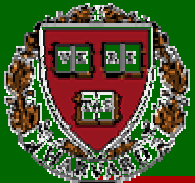
But first, remember the scale of the human enterprise.....

Seemingly “ancient” religions are really only recent human constructions. They are artifacts of writing systems, dating from only the last five or six thousand years or roughly 0.5-0.6% of human history. (5-6,000 out of 1 M years).

Hence, much of human religious understanding of the universe is unknown and probably unknowable to us -- although vestigial foraging societies may give us some clues.

The question then becomes:

Why did western religions “flower” or “explode” all of a sudden?



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## Anthropological approach: Emphasis is upon a *functional* understanding of religions

Religions emerge primarily to mediate enduring anomalies and establish understandings about the existing world as part of the created order in the universe.

Religions provide plausible accounts of the ultimate mysteries of existence -- origin of things, the problem of evil, suffering innocence, and the meaning of death -- through the elaboration of narratives.

*Once narratives are committed to writing, however, literacy begins to have a radical transformative impact on the whole human enterprise for two contradictory reasons.*



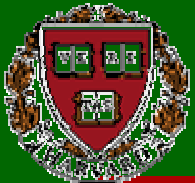
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## Literacy both liberates and entraps human cultural evolution

Literacy “liberates” cultural evolution in this sense:

The technology of literacy radically enhances the capacities of human societies in some respects  
record keeping (taxation, military conscription)  
conventions of ownership (land and non-bullion money)

inter-generational debt/wealth accumulation,  
inheritance, trans-generational debt collection,  
etc.



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## Literacy as a “break” on the evolution of belief...

BUT literacy also radically arrests and freezes the nature of human thinking in other respects. Ideas not only can be preserved, but soon a class emerges that insists that certain ideas **MUST** be preserved.

Writing is a form of culture that takes an effort to learn. Some people must teach it, others learn it, and much of this depends upon the fidelity of replication. Success is in the first instance measured in terms of faithfully replicating the thought of others.



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With writing, narratives can become fixed, and frozen in time; orthodoxy cripples perception.

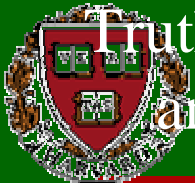
Those in charge of teaching literacy become the guardians of the *acceptable narratives*.

It is in this manner that orthodoxy is born. Whole groups of people are recruited to defend its claims of truth.

Once a particular narrative has become ‘canonized,’ mere experience cannot over-ride it. Experience is checked against the authority of text, the narrative, the orthodox understanding of truth.

More often than not, the text -- and not experience, not reason -- becomes the arbiter of the truth about reality.

Truth claims which ignore the text are labeled as ‘blasphemy’ and ‘unthinkable.’



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Thus, the emergence of literacy marks a radical disjunction in human relations to the environment.

The sensibilities of foraging societies toward their environment are proverbial and profound -- deep seated habits of mind, heart and behavior.

Alas, the sensibilities of these societies stand only as a distant memory or perhaps as wistful hope for the (as yet unrealized) potential of human sensitivity toward the environment.

Since the emergence of writing and the wealth accumulation and state formation that accompanied it, our knowledge systems and our belief systems have been torn apart.

What you *know* to be true can be -- and often is -- radically different from what you profess to *believe*.





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Abramic religions see humans as separate from nature and potentially in charge of it....

All of Western culture -- influenced by the Abramic religious worldview -- seems, in the last 1% of human history, to have become convinced that as a species we are in charge of the whole ecosystem.

This would have been a silly -- even laughable -- worldview to any foraging culture of the kind that characterized over 99% of human history.

But foraging cultures have been wiped out or marginalized in the last 1% of human history by grain-based agricultural societies. Henceforth the illusion of human control over the ecosystem is the dominant public worldview.



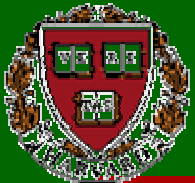
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- **In summary, a worldview is an expression of belief from the experience of a realized ...**

Where did this illusory worldview come from? How did it emerge? Why did it seem credible over such a long time?

For clues, anthropologists look to: the collective, historical experience of peoples in an econiche over time.

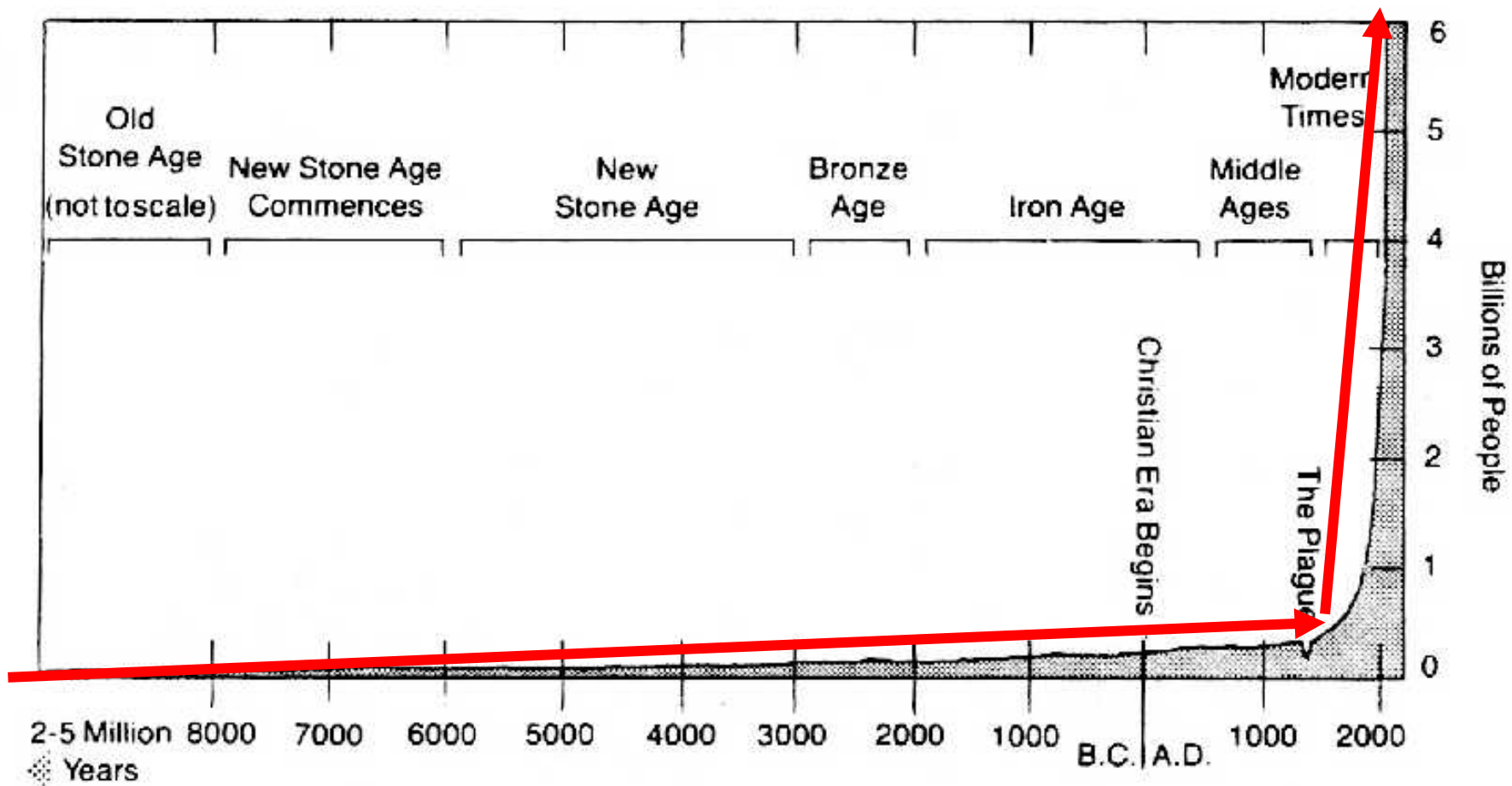
In abstract terms, an econiche is a specific position in the biogeochemical cycling and energy capture/expenditure system. In Hutchinson's terms it is a 'place' occupied in an 'n-dimensional' hypervolume.

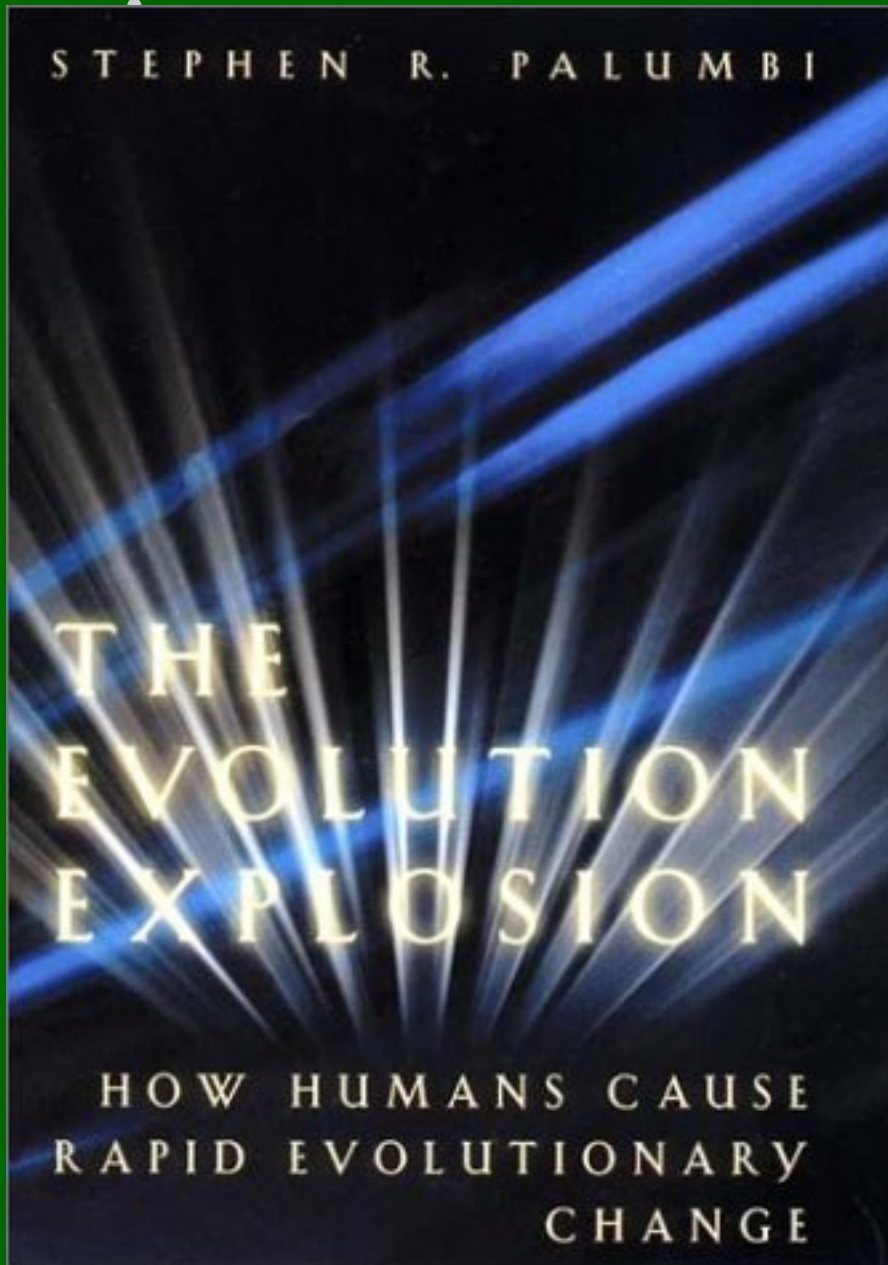
So, it is crucial to understand our econiche in order to begin to analyze our implicit concepts of environmental ethics.



So, we must also understand the *changes in our realized econiche over time*

World Population Growth Through History





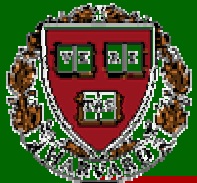
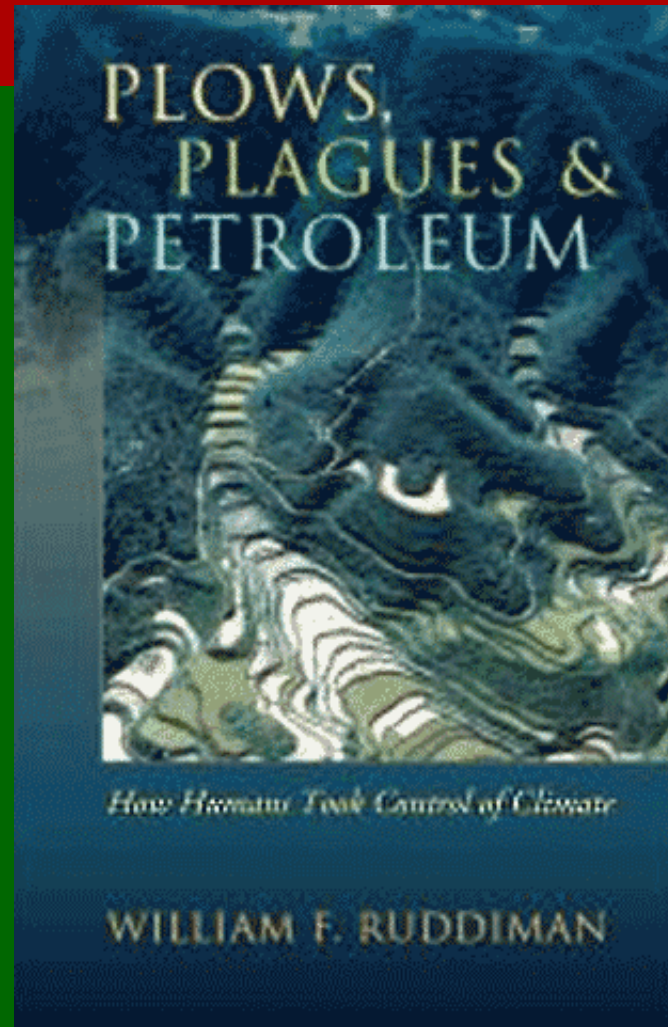
By changing our numbers so rapidly and interacting with an enormous range of species in the ecosystem, we are altering their evolution as well as shaping our own.

Our domesticates – cultigens and domesticated animals -- provide examples of these reciprocal processes.

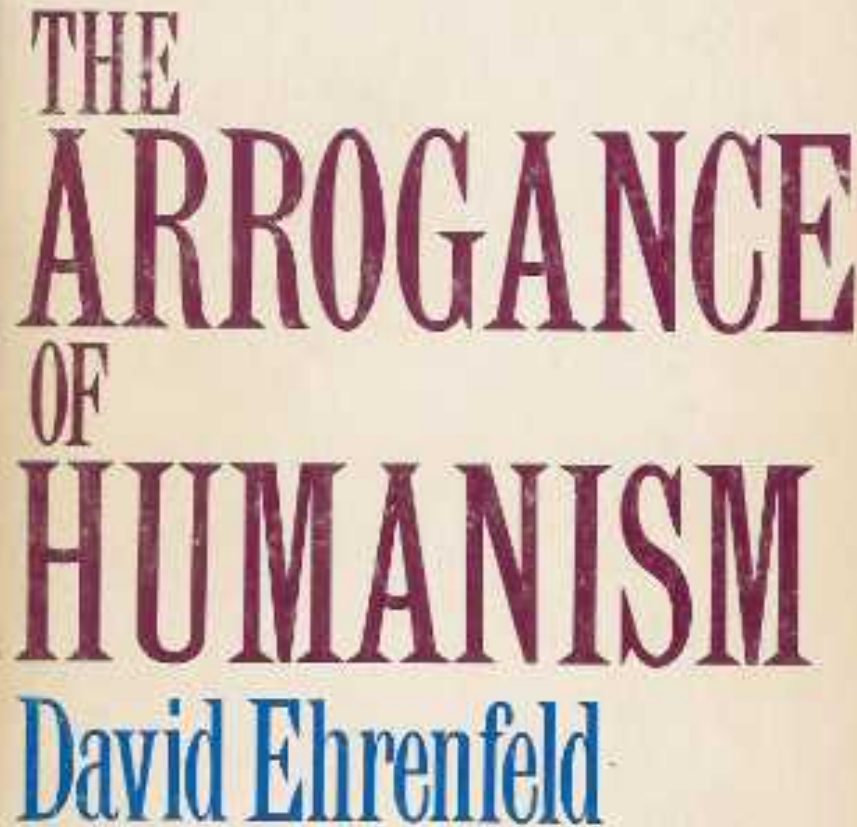
Moreover, they encourage us further in fostering the illusion that “we” are “in control.”

Tim Weiskel - 20

As we have seen some scholars have begun to argue that the ecosystemic transformations engendered by the agricultural revolution marked a major and measurable shift in Earth's climate, suggesting, -- no doubt a bit prematurely -- that we have taken "control" not just of the Earth but of climate as well.







THE  
ARROGANCE  
OF  
HUMANISM  
David Ehrenfeld

Examples of what Ehrenfeld has called the “arrogance of humanism” abound....

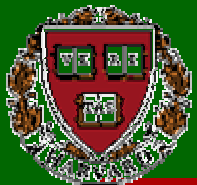
Much of this thinking is driven by an unqualified commitment to ideologies and worldviews derived from the late-bronze age/early-iron age experience in the Palestinian hill country.\*

Some of these ethical foundations need, perhaps to be reexamined in our day.

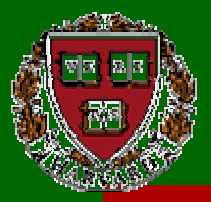
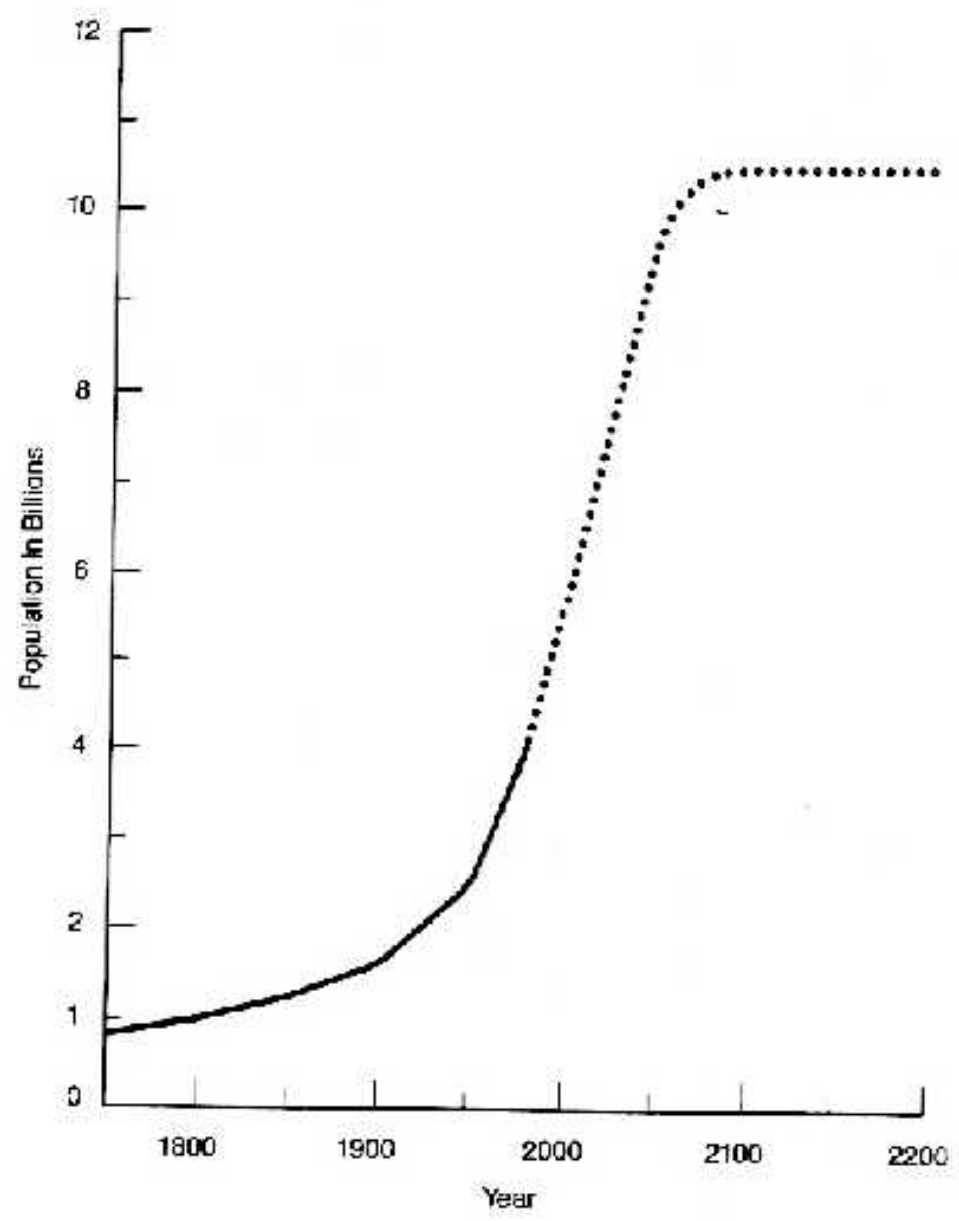




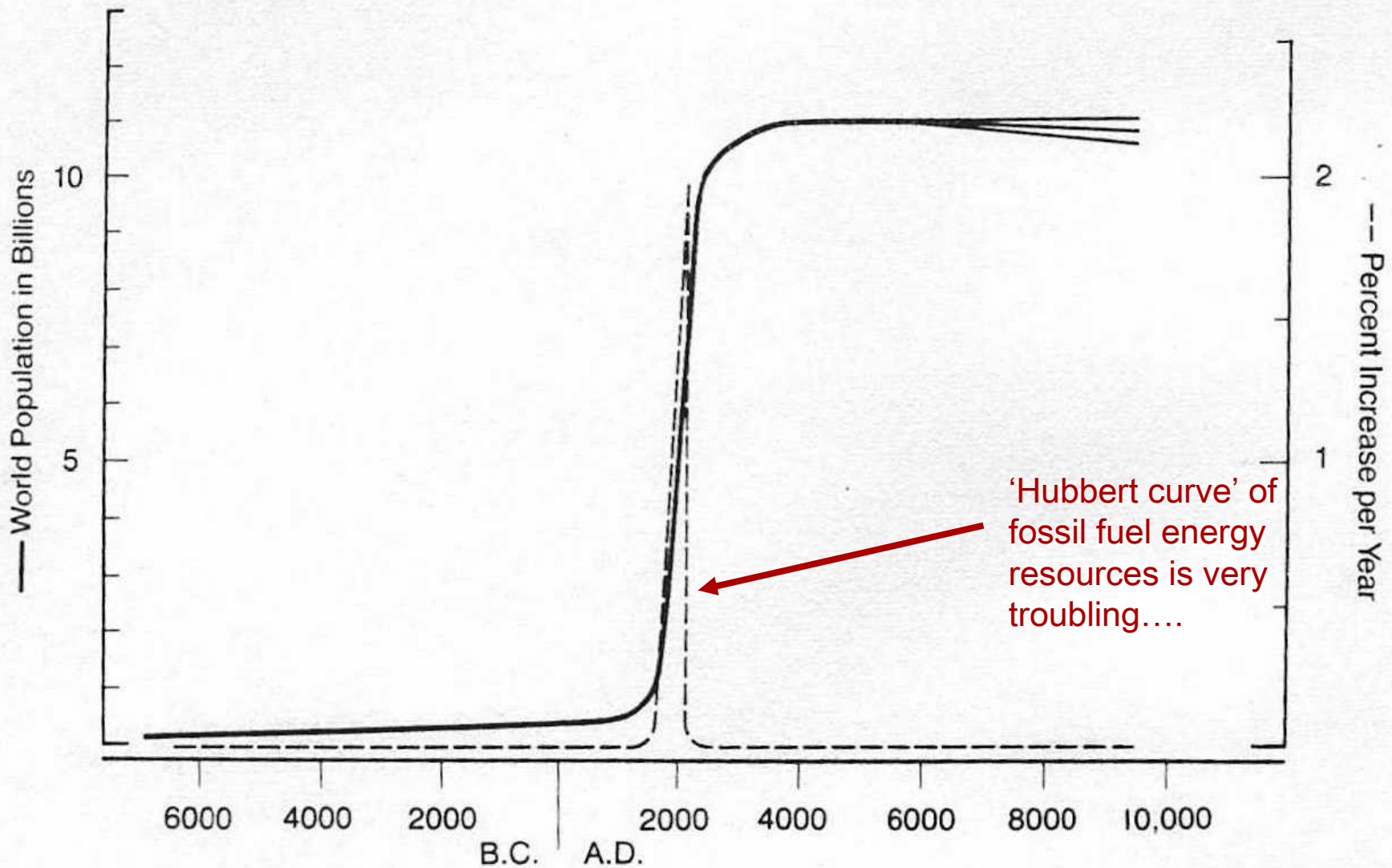
Our impact can be driven by dramatic events  
or by more silent demographic trends...



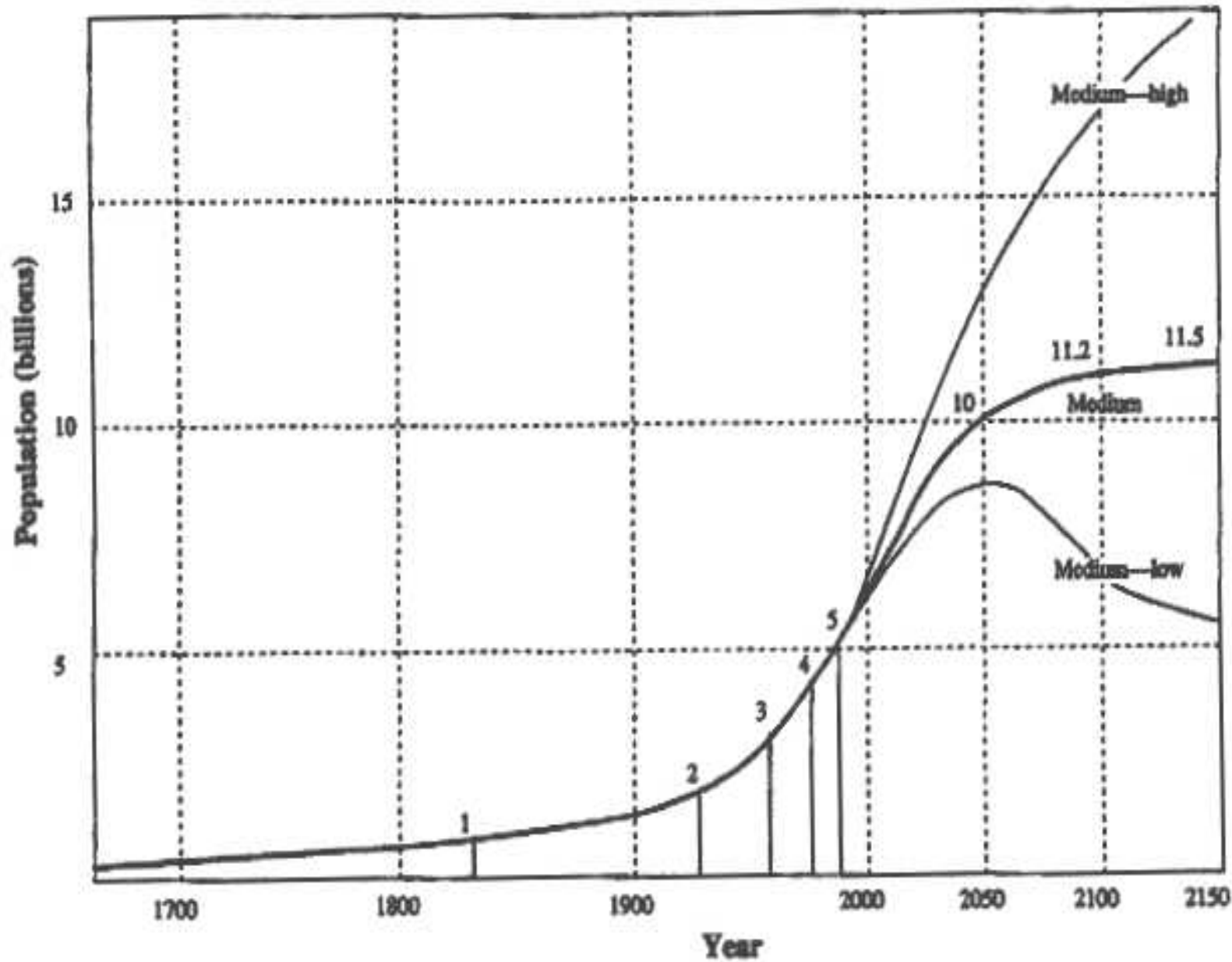
World Population Size, 1750-2200  
(medium variant)







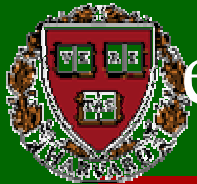
Scientists have pointed out that the human growth rates correlate closely with energy availability...



A General Truth  
about Environmental  
Ethics: “*Perspective  
is Everything*”

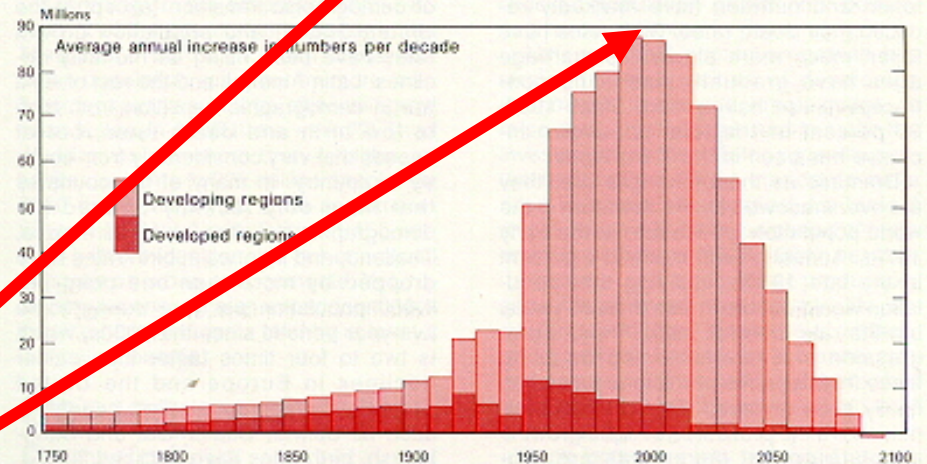
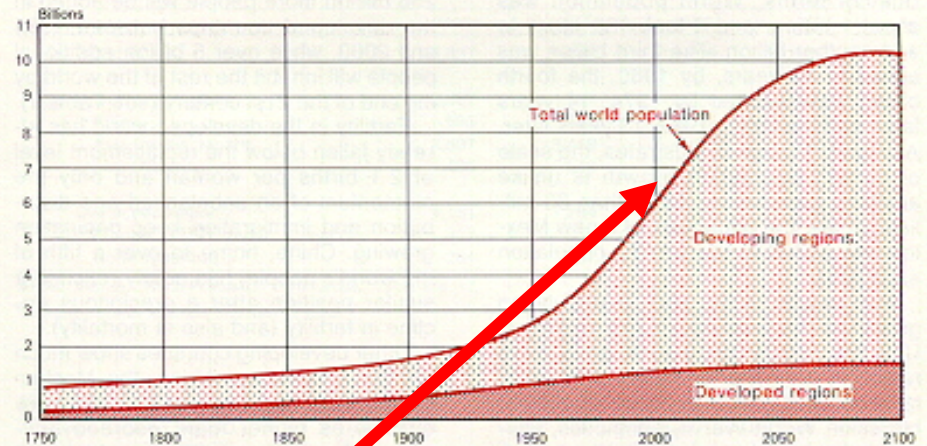
*The definition of ethical  
problems is inevitably linked  
to one’s perspective in the  
over all ecosystem -- one’s  
worldview.*

...as you might  
expect, judgments  
about “the population  
problem” are often  
linked to one’s  
position in the human  
population



explosion.

Figure 1. World, Developing and Developed Regions, Population Growth: 1750-2100



Source: Thomas W. Merrick, with PRB staff, “World Population in Transition,” *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (April 1986) Figure 1, p. 4.

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As an important second step in overcoming our Neolithic ethnocentrism we need to learn how to:

**Identify** moral and ethical arguments forwarded in the realms of environment and public policy.

**Analyze** these arguments.

**Evaluate** these arguments (that is, make judgments about relative merit).

**Formulate** your own arguments in response to the available logic in reference to specific problems.

**Articulate** your moral argument effectively.

and

**Persuade** those who remain unconvinced.

