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• Environmental Ethics and Land Management
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ENVR E-120

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

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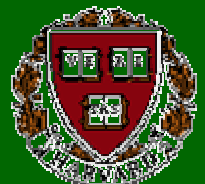
Selected Writers on Environmental Ethics

Timothy C. Weiskel

Session 4 – Part 2

13 October 2005

Harvard University Extension School
Fall Semester 2005



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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.

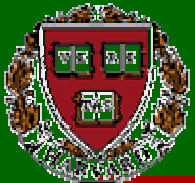
Evaluate these arguments (that is, make judgments about relative merit).

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.



Exercise – Due in class - 20 October

For only the third time in recorded history, the gulf coast experienced two "storms of the century" in less than a month; hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Please consider the questions of environmental ethics raised by this series of events.

Of these, please pick one and briefly – in a short (2 page maximum) paper -- examine **the problem** you have chosen, **the parties involved**, **the principles invoked** and **the policies proposed**.

Please reflect on the implicit theories of **community**, **system**, **authority**, **change**, **agency** and **time** that are implicit in your discussion of **the problem**, **the parties**, **the principles** and **the policies**.

This exercise is intended as a primer before your **Prospectus**.



First Goal: *Identify* a Moral Argument....

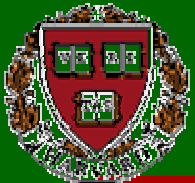
This is not as easy as it might seem at first....

...but behold, I tell you a mystery...

Two confusions abound...

1) Most arguments that present themselves as merely factual or pragmatic arguments are, in reality, *moral* arguments.

2) Similarly, however, most arguments that present themselves as moral arguments are not really any such thing; rather they are *disputes of fact or theory*, and *not* disagreements about what is “right” or “wrong”, “good” or “bad.”



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What are ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ arguments?

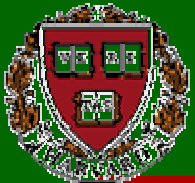
Narrow ‘professional’ definition:

Just as “economic” arguments are those made by professional economists, moral arguments can be considered to be those made by professional “moralists” or “ethicists.”

clergy, academic ethicists or philosophers are given privileged voice in this line of thinking.

A broader definition (used in this course)

At least *some* aspects of *all* argumentation can be said “ethical” or “moral.”



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What are the elements of a moral argument?

A moral argument is one that is framed in terms of a tensions between what *is* and what *ought to be*.

Three-fold problem:

What *is*? What is the definition of the “is-ness” of things?

Who says so? Who has a legitimate ‘voice’? Who does the defining of the current situation?

What *ought to be*? Who gets to frame the description of the ‘desired state?’



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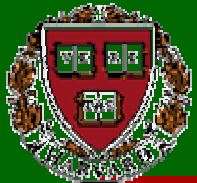
Simple Moral Arguments

In its simplest form moral argument has to do with what is either:

“right” as opposed to “wrong.”

or

what is: “good” as opposed to “bad.”



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Related moral arguments....

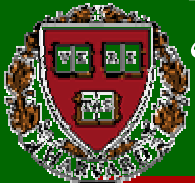
In addition, in many cultures moral argument have to do with what is either:

“true” as opposed to “false”

and what is:

“beautiful” as opposed to “ugly.”

These categories are most often then assimilated or identified with the primal moral categories of “good/bad” or “right/wrong”



Where do “ethics” come from?

How do we decide on ‘right’ vs. ‘wrong,’
or ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’?

Implicit Moral Code

We decide what is right or wrong, good or bad on the
basis of an *implicit moral code*.

An implicit moral code is a cultural phenomena
modified by personal reflection and perhaps
individual revelation.

But it is above all a *cultural* phenomena.



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What are the features of a *Cultural Phenomena*?

Cultural Phenomena are:

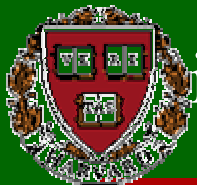
- *learned, unconscious, collective* patterns of thought and behavior.

That is:

- they are *learned* -- not instinctive (genetic);
- they are *unconscious* -- learned *long before and independently* of reflection. (therefore hard to get at and 'see' in one's own culture; more visible in other peoples' cultures);

and

- they are *collective or shared* -- not idiosyncratic.



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Cultural Phenomena have 2 Key Features

Most importantly, any cultural phenomena must be understood as consisting of two (2) key features:

Structure

and

Content



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Structure is more enduring than content...

Of the two features -- structure and content -- structure is *far more important in controlling belief and behavior* and far more enduring over time. For this reason the structure of belief is *much less* amenable to conscious change or alteration. It is much more subtle and difficult to reverse.

Locating the structure of a moral argument is like searching for *the grammar of moral discourse* beneath the surface utterances of moral content.

(The analogy is to “structural linguistics”
not “comparative literature.”)

Tim Weiskel - 12



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Analyzing the ‘Grammar’ of Moral Discourse

Consider some examples from the study of the ‘grammar’ of language:

What is the structure of the utterance:

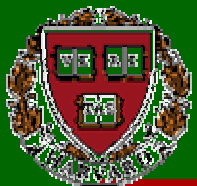
“John went to the store.” ?

Is it the same as:

“Jane went to Los Angeles” ?

We know these as English because we know the words *but also because* we know that they have an English grammatical structure:

[subject-verb-object].



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Encountering implicit structure

Consider the following utterance:

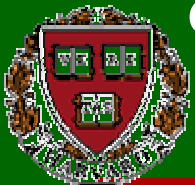
igglesquiggstrazedwamblyintheharrishgoop

What does it *mean*?

Is it English?

Does it have to *mean* something to be ‘English’?

In what way can structure (as distinct from content) convey meaning? Can the *structural meaning* of moral propositions be as important as their cultural content?



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Can you diagram the utterance?

igglesquiggstrazedwamblyintheharrishgoop



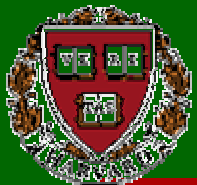
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Can you diagram the utterance?

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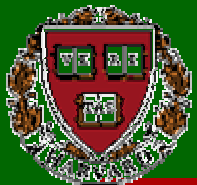
Can you diagram the utterance?

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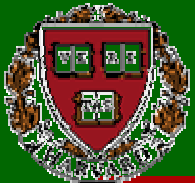
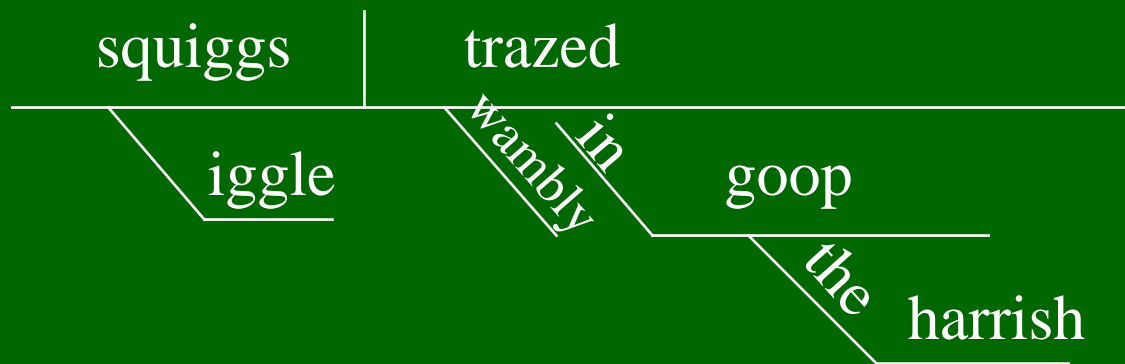
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Can you diagram the utterance?

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Two Approaches to the Study of Ethics as there are Two Approaches to Grammar

Broadly speaking there are two approaches to the study of ethics and morality (just as there are two approaches to the study of grammar).

One approach is to assume the prior existence and subsequent implementation of rules. Hence the exercise is one of announcing, applying, re-stating, enforcing, etc. rules to behavior.

The second approach is one of trying to discover or derive principles of moral behavior by evaluating the likely consequences of behavior alternatives.



Deontological Vs. Consequentialist Approaches to Analyzing Ethics

Broadly speaking these two approaches to ethical reasoning are known as:

- the **Deontological** approach (absolute rules already exist and merely need to be applied to circumstances). **Deductive approach.**

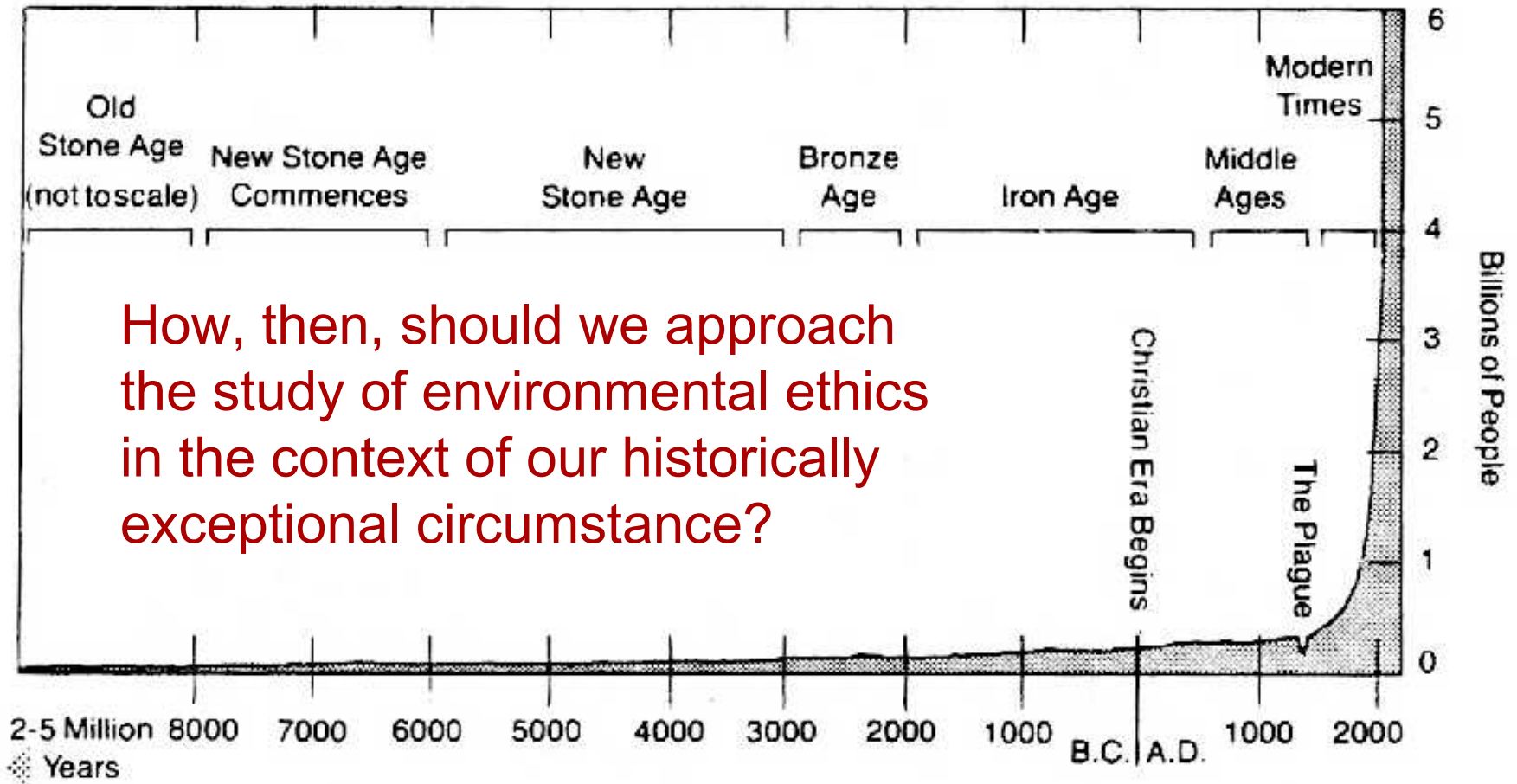
- the **Consequentialist** approach (principles do exist, but they must be derived by evaluating the consequences of proposed behavior and establishing norms) . **Inductive approach.**

Important to underscore that:

Both approaches emphasize principles, BUT these principles are constituted in a different manner.



World Population Growth Through History



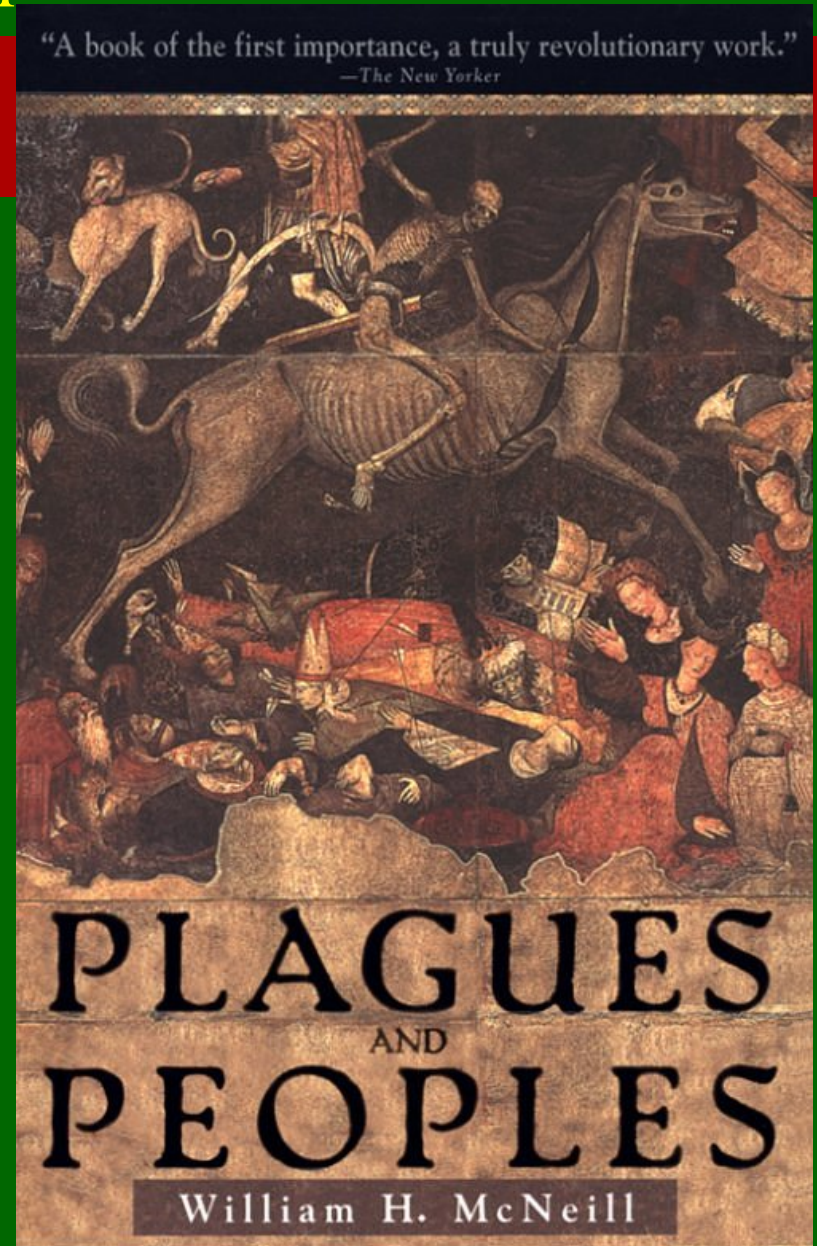
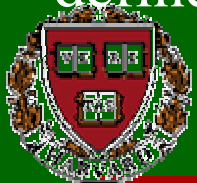
How, then, should we approach the study of environmental ethics in the context of our historically exceptional circumstance?



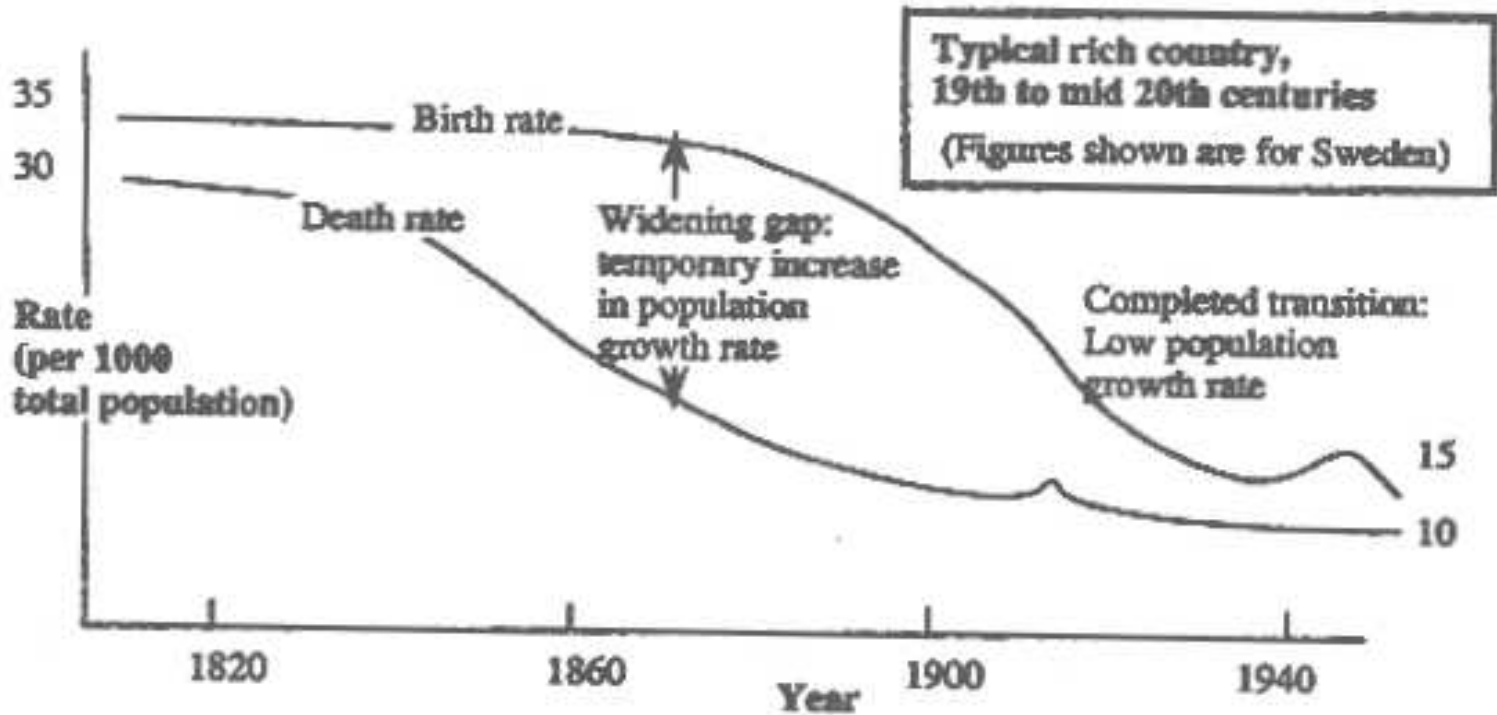
Let's begin by looking at radical imbalances of the past...

“Skill and knowledge, though they have profoundly transformed ordinary encounters with disease for most of humankind, have not and in the nature of things never can extricate humanity from its age-old position....

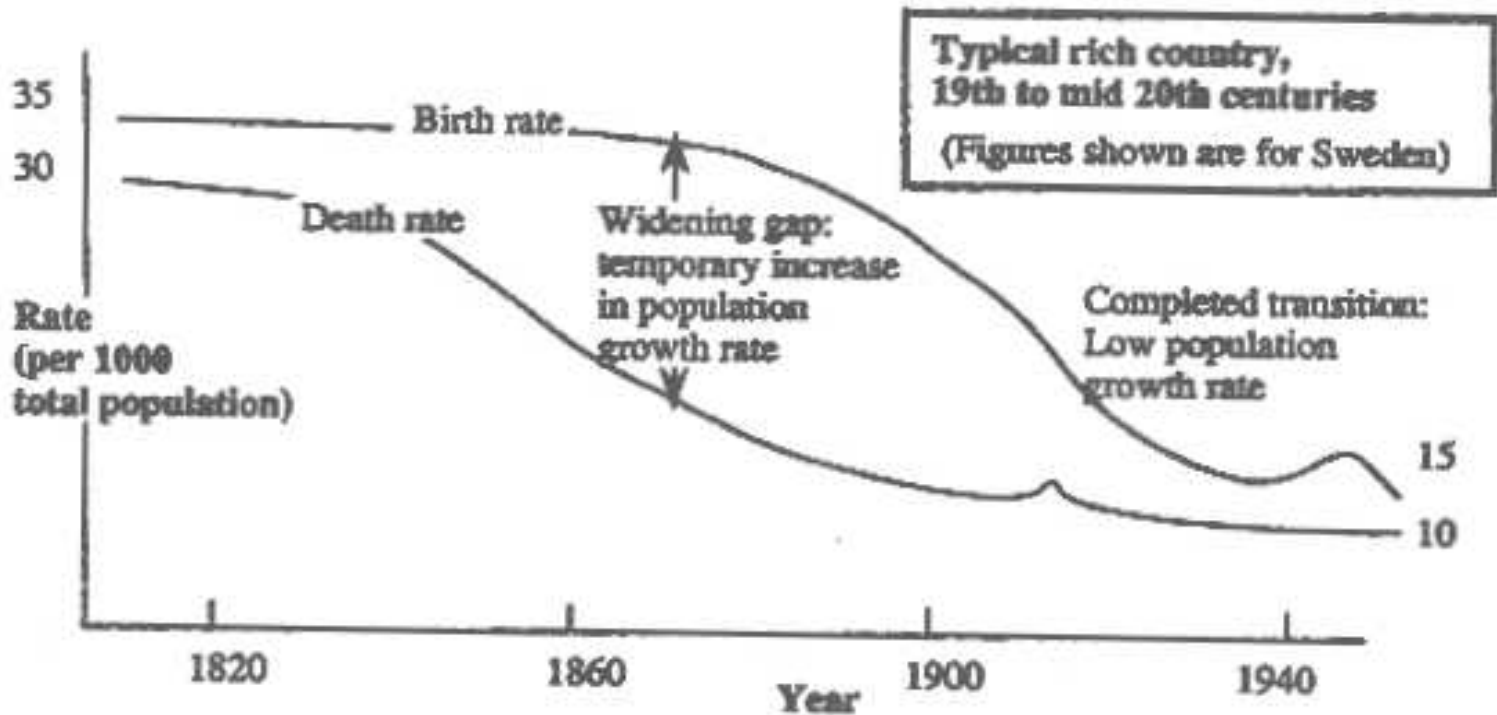
Birth control may in time catch up with death control. Something like a stable balance between human numbers and resources may then begin to define itself.”



The “Demographic Transition”



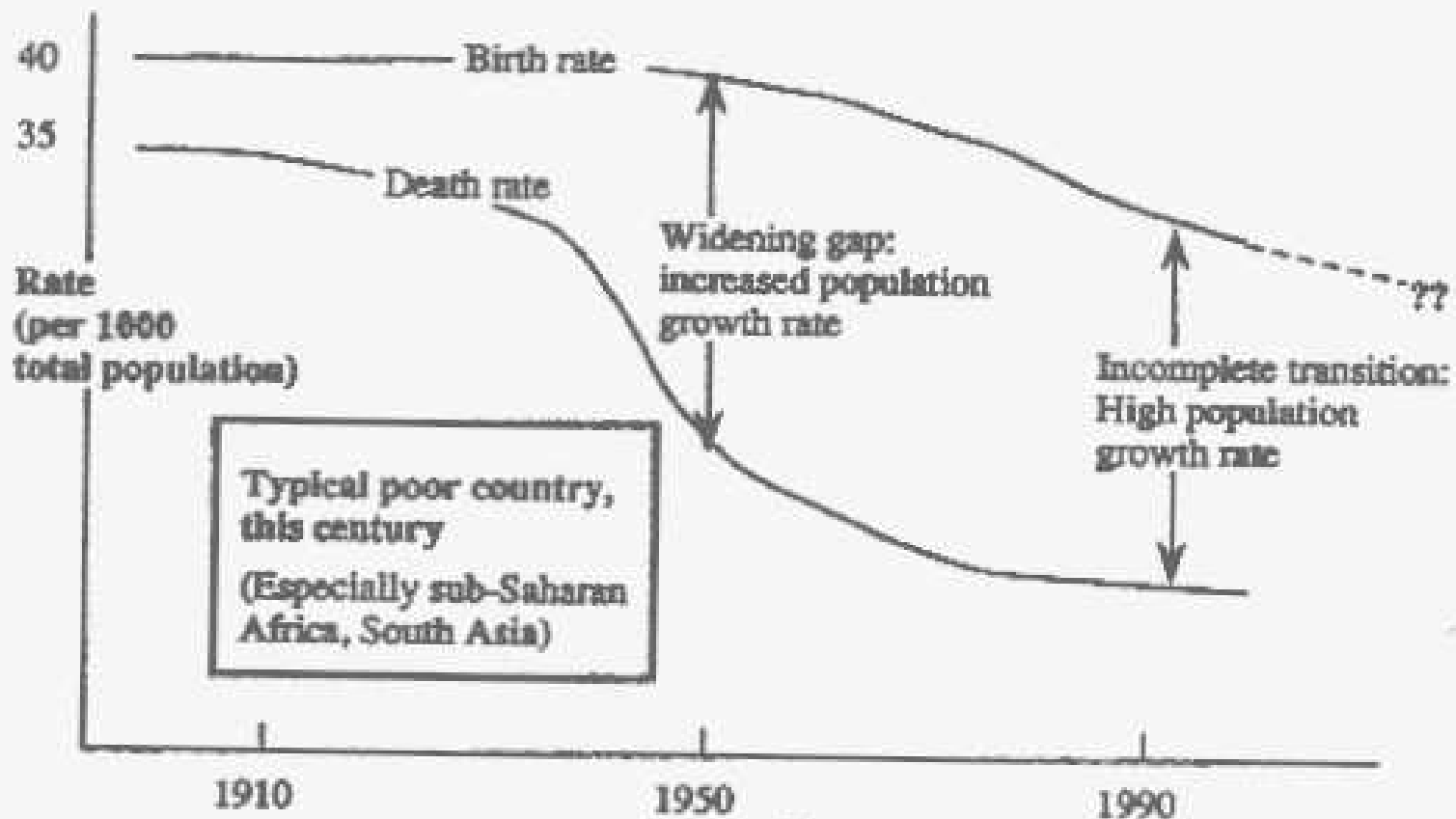
The “Demographic Transition”



But, this is only typical of rich European countries in the 19th and 20th centuries....

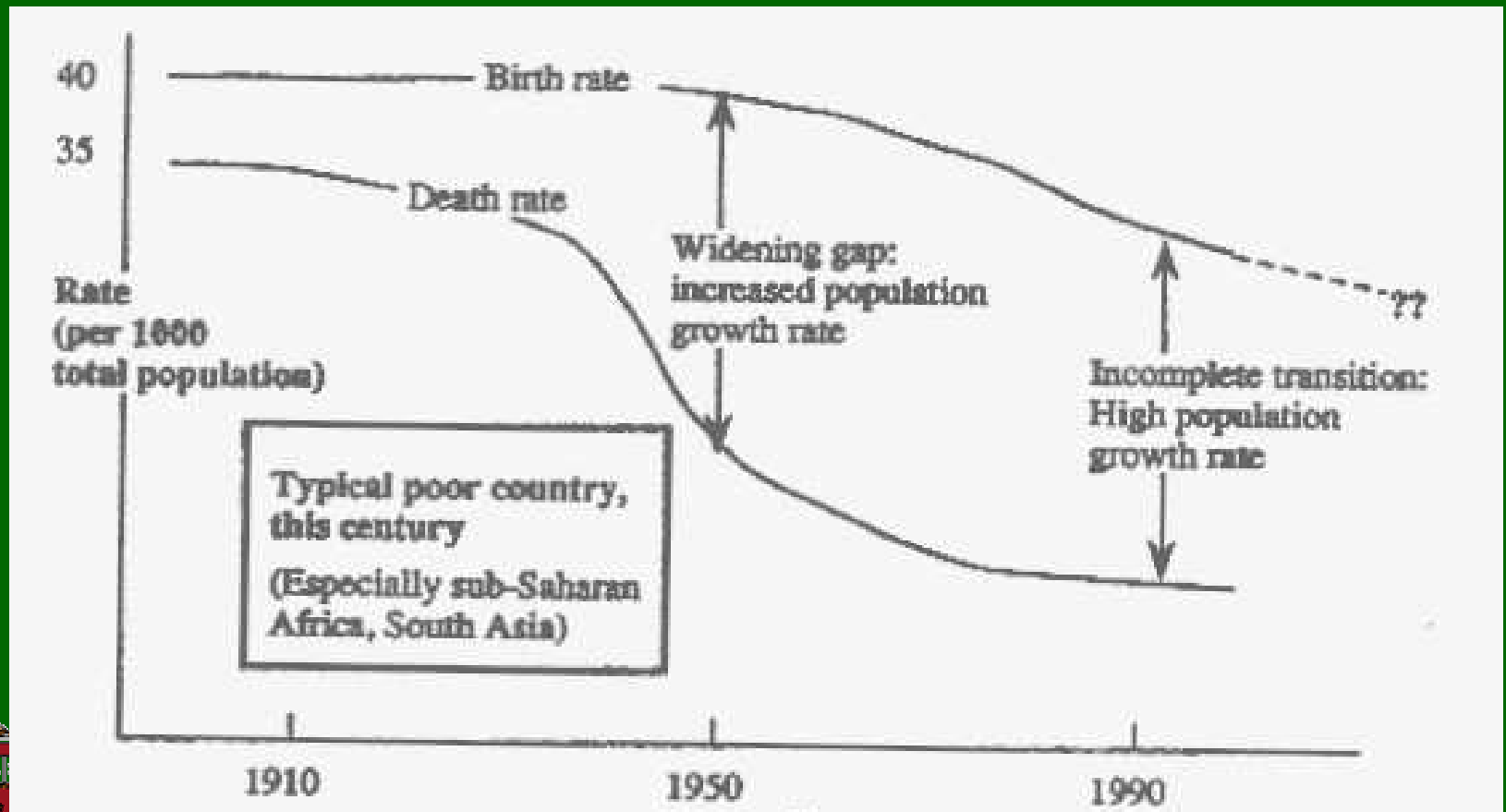


What about the 'Third World' -- i.e.. the two-thirds world, really the four-fifths world?



What about the 'Third World' -- i.e.. the two-thirds world, really the four-fifths world?

What 'transition' is occurring here?



“A book of the first importance, a truly revolutionary work.”
—The New Yorker



PLAGUES AND PEOPLES

William H. McNeill

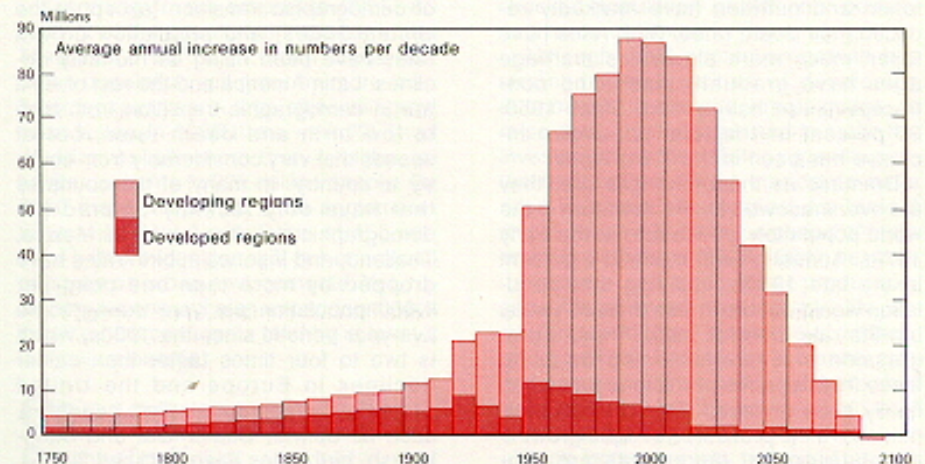
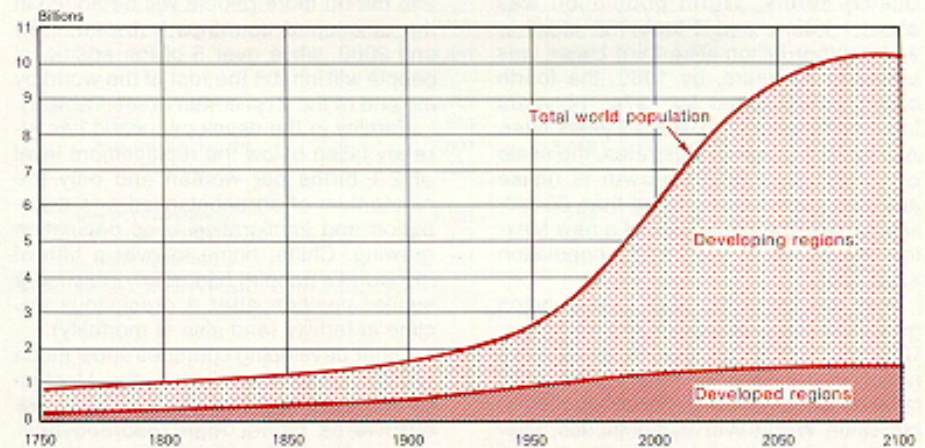
“... for the present and short-range future, it remains obvious that humanity is in course of one of the most massive and extraordinary ecological upheavals the planet has ever known. Not stability but a sequence of sharp alterations and abrupt oscillations in existing balances ...can be expected in the near future as in the recent past.

“Ingenuity, knowledge, and organization alter but cannot cancel humanity’s vulnerability...”

Clearly, there are widely differing assessments of our circumstances and widely moral differing positions on how we ought to behave collectively.

This, in part, derives from a different ‘lived experience’...

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.



OVERSHOOT

The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change

carrying capacity: maximum permanently supportable load.

cornucopian myth: euphoric belief in limitless resources.

drawdown: stealing resources from the future.

cargoism: delusion that technology will always save us from

overshoot: growth beyond an area's carrying capacity, leading to

crash: die-off.

William R. Catton, Jr.

Foreword by Stewart Udall

Some authors have written about how the human community has “overshot” the carrying capacity of the earth.

Georg Borgstrom

\$2.95

author of *The Hungry Planet*

An international food science authority spells out the stark realities facing man if we continue to push our earth to its biological limits.

TOO MANY

AN ECOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF EARTH'S LIMITATIONS

"Level-headed, factual and scary . . . not a book for those who would remain complacent."
—*Los Angeles Times*



These perspectives are not new. They have been stated with increasing urgency since Thomas Malthus's first *Essay on Population* in the late eighteenth century.

Both Thomas Malthus and many who have written since have portrayed this as a moral issue.



THE
IMMORALITY
OF
LIMITING
GROWTH

EDWARD WALTER

But not all people agree with the morality expressing the need for limits.

Indeed, some argue that it is immoral to limit human growth and the economic growth that seems to accompany it.*

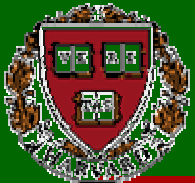
This argument often comes from conservative religious leaders on the one hand or techno-scientific salvationists -- perhaps the leaders of the most pervasive form of religion in our Western culture, if not the world.



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- To review....

Our Circumstance:

We live on the third planet from the sun, our closest star. As stars go, it is not a very big one. Nor is the planet, for that matter. Even with gadgets of our own making it can be circled in an hour or so. It's a pretty small place to call home in the vastness of all that we have come to know as creation.



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Our Circumstance:

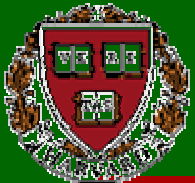
Yet home it is; and an extremely vulnerable one at that. Most of the planet is covered with water, some of which periodically turns to ice in the high latitudes as solar radiation and the planet's orbital trajectory vary over time. Moreover, the planet is enclosed in an improbable envelope of gases whose precise proportions -- essential for our existence -- can only be maintained through the continuous metabolism of countless life-forms on or near its surface.



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Our Circumstance:

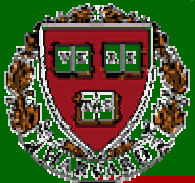
Species, populations and communities of these life-forms co-evolve over time in response to the alternate rhythms of ice and warmth and the variation of habitat created by drifting continental plates, changing sea levels, and shifting regional climates.



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Our Circumstance:

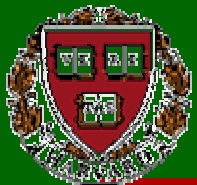
Humans are a recent arrival in the community of life-forms, prospering during the inter-glacial periods only over the last million years of a three billion year continuum -- that is, in roughly the last 0.03% of life's unfolding drama. Moreover, it now seems probable that we will not endure any longer than many of the other transient life-forms that have left traces of their bones or behavior in the sands and sediments of time.



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Our Circumstance:

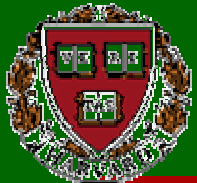
The capacity for intelligence which humans possess may not prove to be an adaptive trait in the long run, especially since human intelligence is frequently deployed to kill fellow humans or extinguish other life-supporting organisms crucial for long term human survival.



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Our Circumstance:

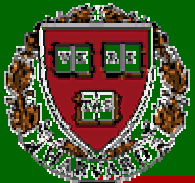
In biological terms humans provide no essential functions for the survival of other large communities of life-forms -- save, perhaps, for our own domesticated animals, plants and parasites. If we disappear it is probable that wheat, rice, cattle, camels and the common cold virus will not survive in their current forms for very long.



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Our Circumstance:

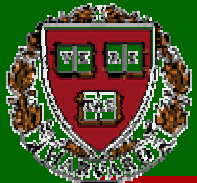
But the vast majority of the earth's organisms can do perfectly well, indeed perhaps thrive even better, without us or our biological associates.



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Our Beliefs:

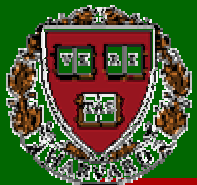
None of this is news. Common sense and a junior high school education can impress this much upon our minds. Yet the curious fact is that we refuse to believe it. We continue to strut and prance about with a sense of supreme self-importance as if all creation were put in place for our benefit.



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Our Beliefs:

As the zoologist David Ehrenfeld has observed, in spite of what science has revealed about our place in the universe "we still believe that the force of gravity exists in order to make it easier for us to sit down."



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Our Beliefs:

From where does such arrogance come? How can our beliefs be so far out of touch with our knowledge? How can we maintain such an inflated sense of personal, collective and species self-importance?

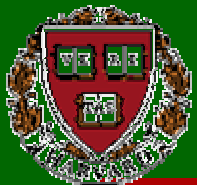


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Our Beliefs:

The answer, in part, is that Western religious traditions have generated and sustained this petty arrogance. A culture's religious beliefs are constructed from what that group has come to believe in religiously.



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Our Beliefs:

Ever since the advent of cereal agriculture and with increasing intensity since the emergence of humanist thought stemming from the European Renaissance, Western cultures have come to believe religiously in their own power, importance and capacity to dominate and control nature.



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The *structure* Western belief systems is largely to blame. It rests upon an assumption of “exceptionalism” -- somehow we think “we” are “set apart.”



Historically the Abrahamic religions which emerged from the marginal agricultural lands of the Middle East were an important source of this “exceptionalism.”

Covenantal Exceptionalism

People believed themselves to be “set apart” (from nature and history) by virtue of a special covenant with Yahweh -- an Israeli war god.

Christianity emphasized “Confessional Exceptionalism”



JESUS WALKING ON THE SEA
He saith unto them, It is I; be not afraid.... (John 6: 20)

According to some, the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, was said to be the “Christ” -- son of God, and thereby an exception to the natural process everyone else experienced.

Confessional Exceptionalism

Confessing faithfulness promised abundance...

Jesus is presented in several narratives as if he has control over natural process. For those who trust him and declare their faith, he directs them toward resources they normally find hard or impossible to acquire on their own.



THE MIRACULOUS DRAUGHT OF FISHES

And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes. . . . (John 21: 6)



Richard Leakey
and Roger Lewin



the Sixth Extinction

PATTERNS OF LIFE AND THE
FUTURE OF HUMANKIND

"Well informed, artfully portrayed—and unsettling...an unnerving tale of [flora and fauna] emerging in a wink of the evolutionary eye and exiting just as abruptly."

—*New York Times Book Review*

But scientists are reminding us that despite our sincere beliefs in covenantal exceptionalism or confessional exceptionalism, humankind is not an exception to the functioning laws of the ecosystem over time.

Further, they point out, that our enduring structure of belief grounded in exceptionalism is blinding us to the major biogeological fact of our time -- that we are in the midst of Earth's *Sixth Extinction*. *

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It would seem that we had better re-examine our
Implicit Theories in our Ethical Discourse

Our (common) Theory of **Community**

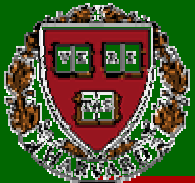
Our (common) Theory of **System**

Our (common) Theory of **Authority**

Our (common) Theory of **Change**

Our (common) Theory of **Agency**

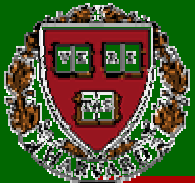
Our (common) Theory of **Time**



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A Theory of Community

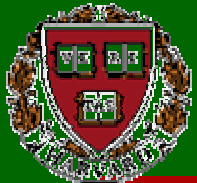
What community is assumed to be the relevant moral community by what the speaker has either stated or implied? Is this community aware of itself as a community? Are there a variety of moral communities? Who or what is "within" the moral community? Who or what is explicitly excluded or excluded by implication?



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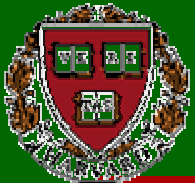
A Theory of System

What is the overall concept of system employed by the discipline? How do various moral communities relate to one another in a larger system of connected relations? What are the principles or attributes of that system governing how moral communities relate to one another?



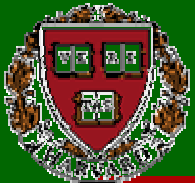
A Theory of Authority...

What is the explicit or implicit concept of authority in the propositions being forwarded? What *warrant* do we have to assert that such-and-such is “good” or “right”? What source of authority exists to settle disputes between contesting ideas of the “good” and the “right”? In other words, what is the *ultimate source* of moral authority?



A Theory of Change

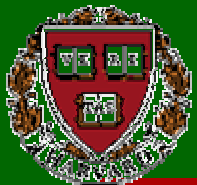
Where does change come from? How is it explained?
Does change emanate from *within* the system or is it conceived as *exogenous*? If it is endogenous *how* is change alleged to occur within the system? What is (or are) the presumed indices of change?



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A Theory of Agency

Who or what the agent *of change* or *stability* in the moral community or in the system as a whole? Is it ever legitimate for moral agents to intervene in a wider inter-connected system to achieve certain ends? If so, when and under what circumstances is intervention justified? If not, what is the justification of non-intervention?



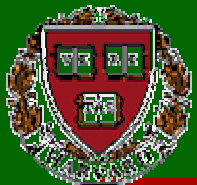
A Theory of Time

How late is it? Are different kinds of intervention morally justifiable according to a "theory of moment?" When is it morally justified not to intervene because the "moment has passed" or perhaps it "has not yet come?" What is the narrative shape of time implied by the disciplinary discourse? Is it "never too late?" or "always too late?" or sometimes just the right "window of opportunity?"



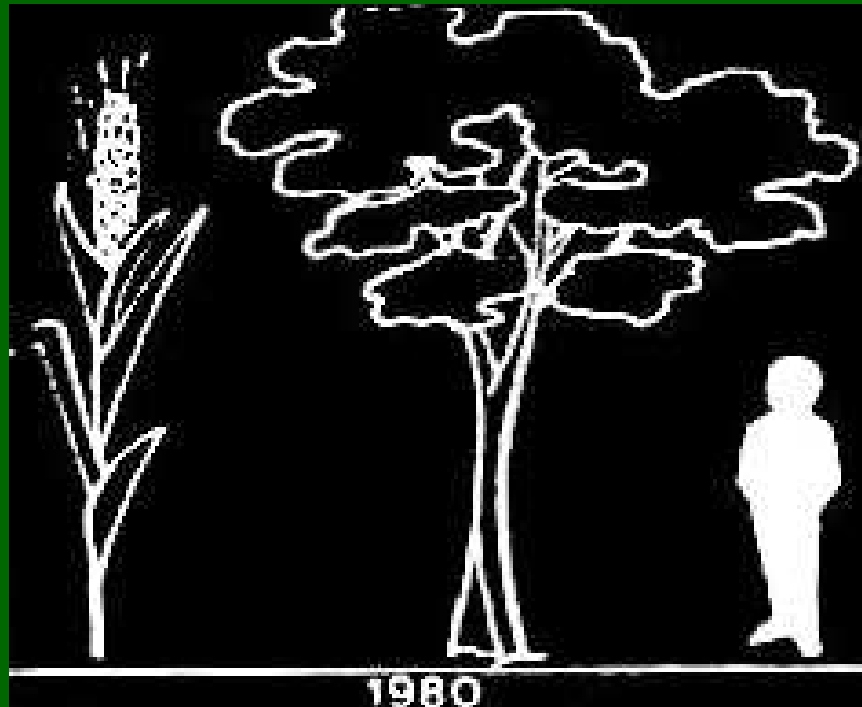
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The community of life forms on earth can be described in terms of ratios between living populations.



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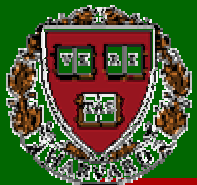
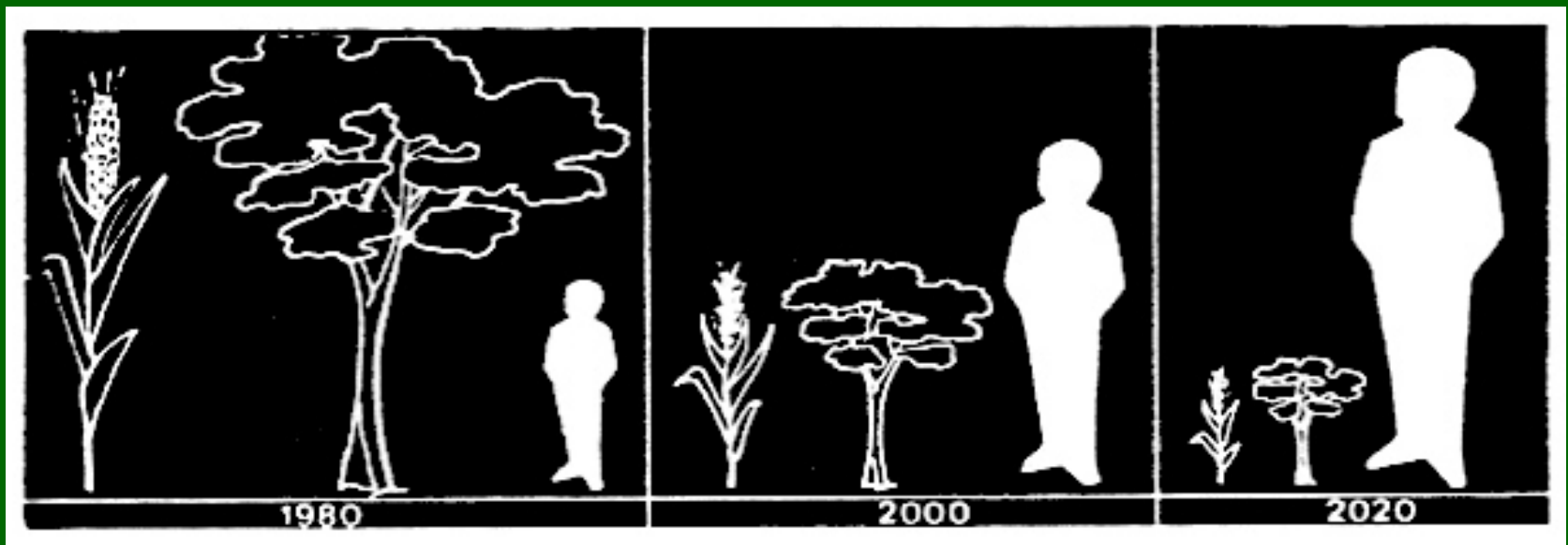
Further, these ratios can, in principle, be measured and specified at specific times in history.



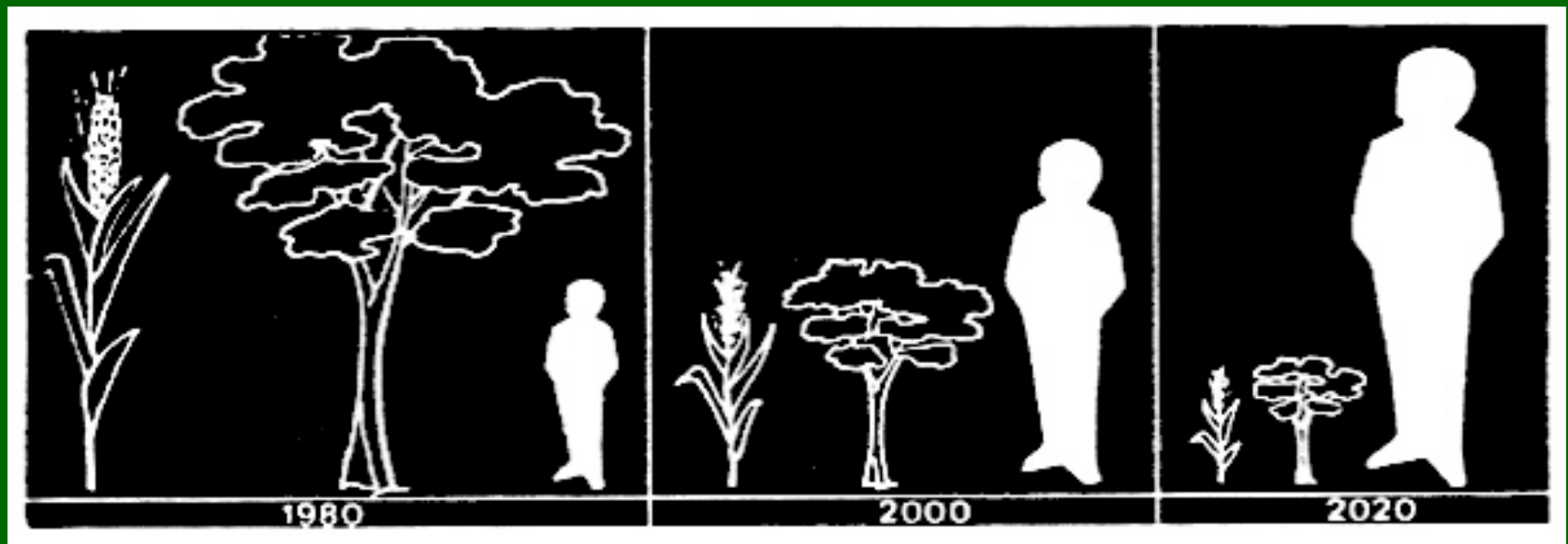
If you compare the evolution of ratios over time, some worrisome trends become apparent.



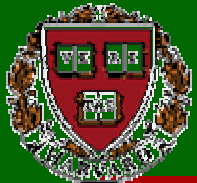
If you project these trends into the foreseeable future, some very dramatic problems appear.



If you project these trends into the foreseeable future, some very dramatic problems appear.



The projected trajectory of these shifts in ratios is both *unstable* and *unsustainable*.



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Some examples...the Ethics of the Ivory Trade....

Elephants are reported to be on the verge of extinction. (AP Report). [t](#)

What are the factors behind the demand for Ivory? [t](#)

Yet despite threatened extinction some people seem to be promoting the trade in ivory in Africa. (See for example the BBC Report on this African dilemma. [*](#) and [t](#))



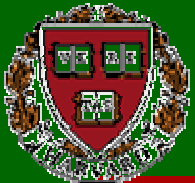
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What are the 'ethics' of the ivory trade?

Is the trade in ivory ethically defensible?

Who should judge? Who has a 'voice' on this question? Whose are the relevant opinions? groups in Africa? which groups? *

What about non-African elephant populations in India?



On beyond elephants....

Isn't the elephant issue part of a larger problem?

For example,

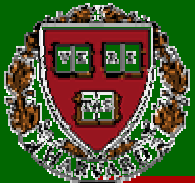
What about elephants populations Vs. other endangered species? t

What about the large mammals of the sea whales? T *

What about non 'charismatic' species? t

What about the the full range of biodiversity? *

Including insects and microbes? *



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Selected Writers on Environmental Ethics

Timothy C. Weiskel

Session 4 – Part 2

13 October 2005

Harvard University Extension School
Fall Semester 2005

