Environmental Ethics and Land Management

ENVR E-120

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

Selected Writers on Environmental Ethics

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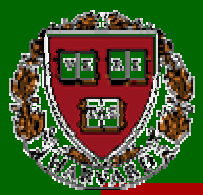
Assumptions that are ‘built in’ to ‘Neolitic Ethnocentrism’

- Growth is “natural.”
- Growth is “good.”
- More is better.
- Accumulation is possible therefore both necessary *and* virtuous.
- Wealth embodies success and [Divine] favor.
  - [Monotheistic variant…] Natural process is under supreme Divine control.
  - some humans are entrusted as ‘stewards’ and ‘chosen’ with privileged roles as agents.



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

A Theory of **Community**

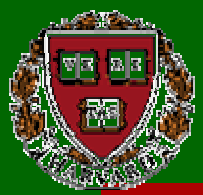
A Theory of **System**

A Theory of **Authority**

A Theory of **Change**

A Theory of **Agency**

A Theory of **Time**

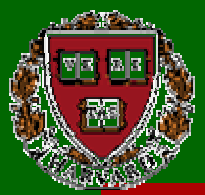


Analysis of implicit theories leads to understanding of the hierarchy of values = ***Worldview***

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."*

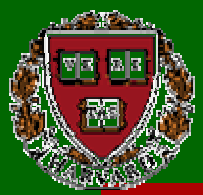


Where do worldviews come from?

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.

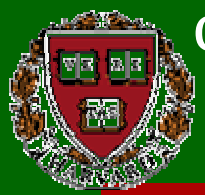
The greater the stability and continuity of the social formation, the greater the coherence of its worldview.



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.



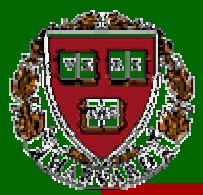
Worldviews not ‘bothered’ by mere facts...

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.

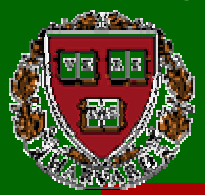


Reality is often denied in defense of the self-affirming features of a worldview….

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….



"Western" religions emerge abruptly within the Middle East in a comparatively sort time frame...

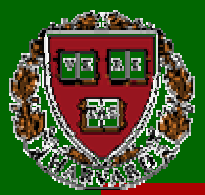
But first, remember the scale of the human enterprise…..

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 vestigal foraging societies may give us some clues.

The question then becomes:

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

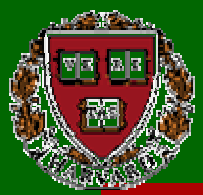


Anthropological approach: Emphasis is upon a *functional* understanding of religions

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.



Literacy both liberates and entraps human cultural evolution

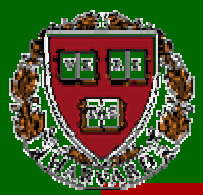
Literacy "liberates" cultural evolution in this sense:

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)

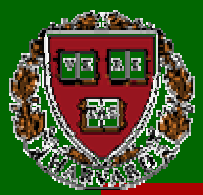
inter-generational debt/wealth accumulation, inheretance, trans-generational debt collection, etc.



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.



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.'

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*.

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.

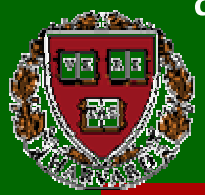
In summary, a worldview is an expression of belief from the experience of a realized econiche….

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

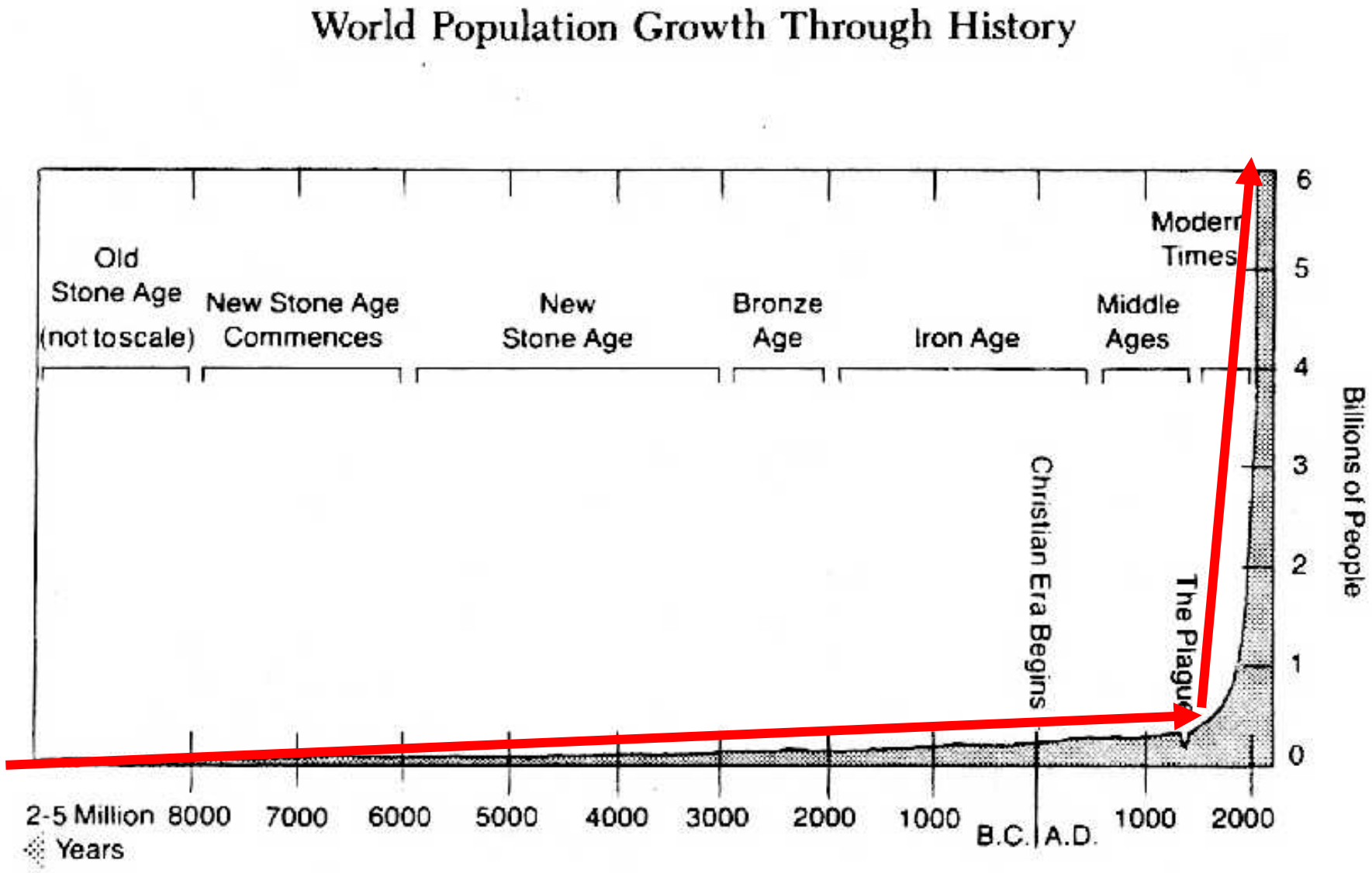
For clues, anthropologists look to: the **collective, historical experience of peoples in an econiche over time.**

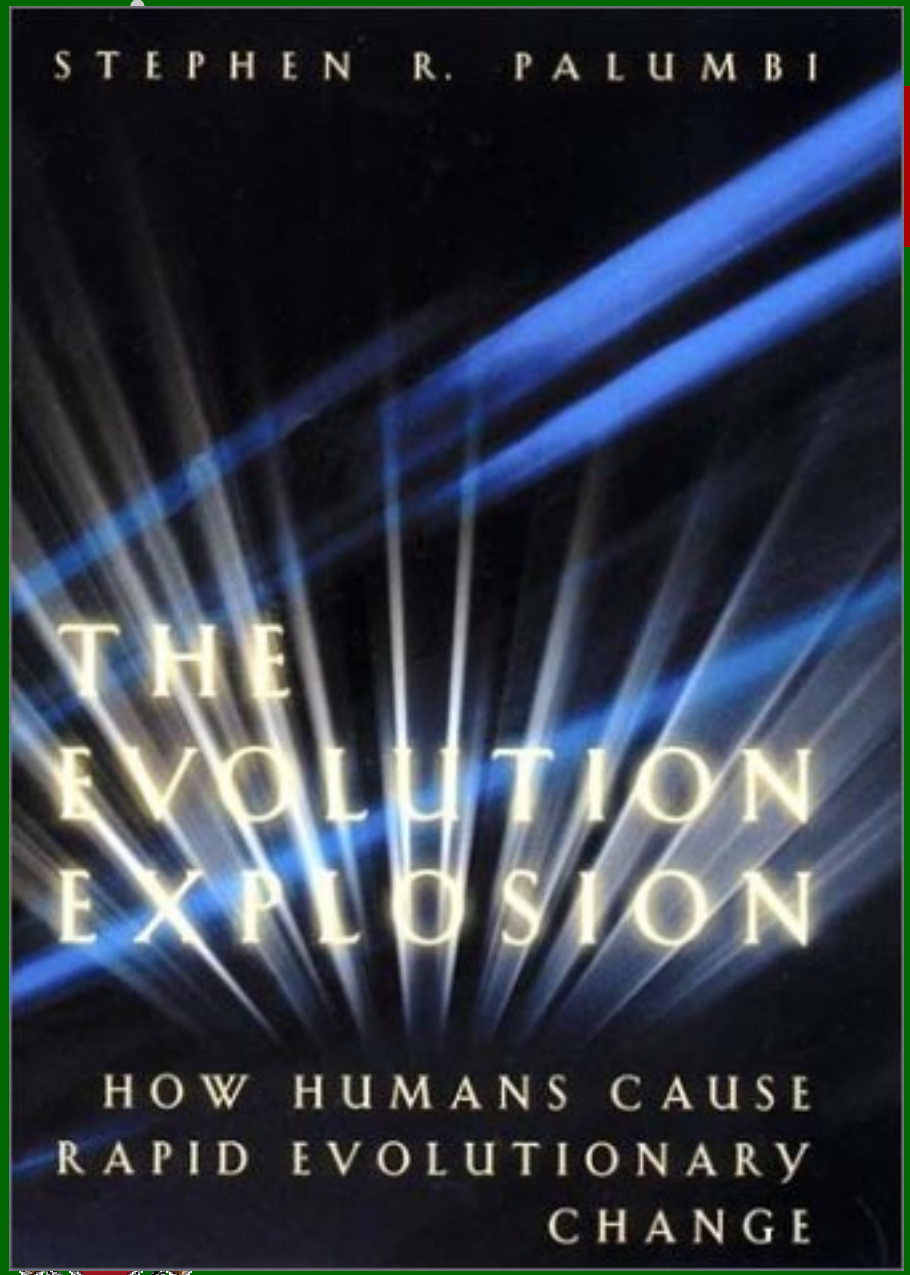
In abstract terms, an econiche is a specific position in the biogeochemcial cycling and energy capture/expenditure system. In Hutchinson's terms it is a 'place' occupied in an 'n-dimentional' hypervolume.

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



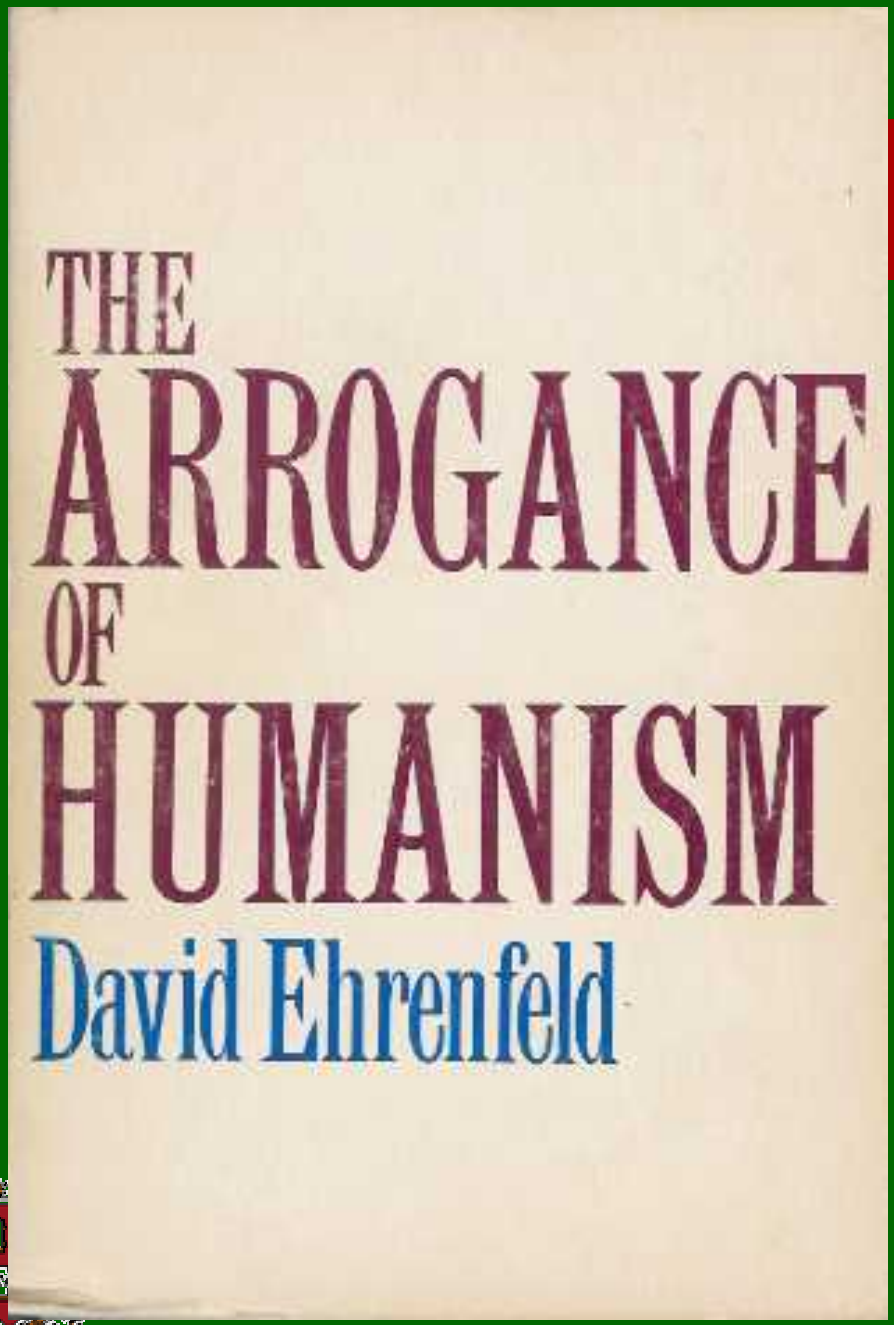
So, we must also understand the ***changes in*** **our realized econiche** over time





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.

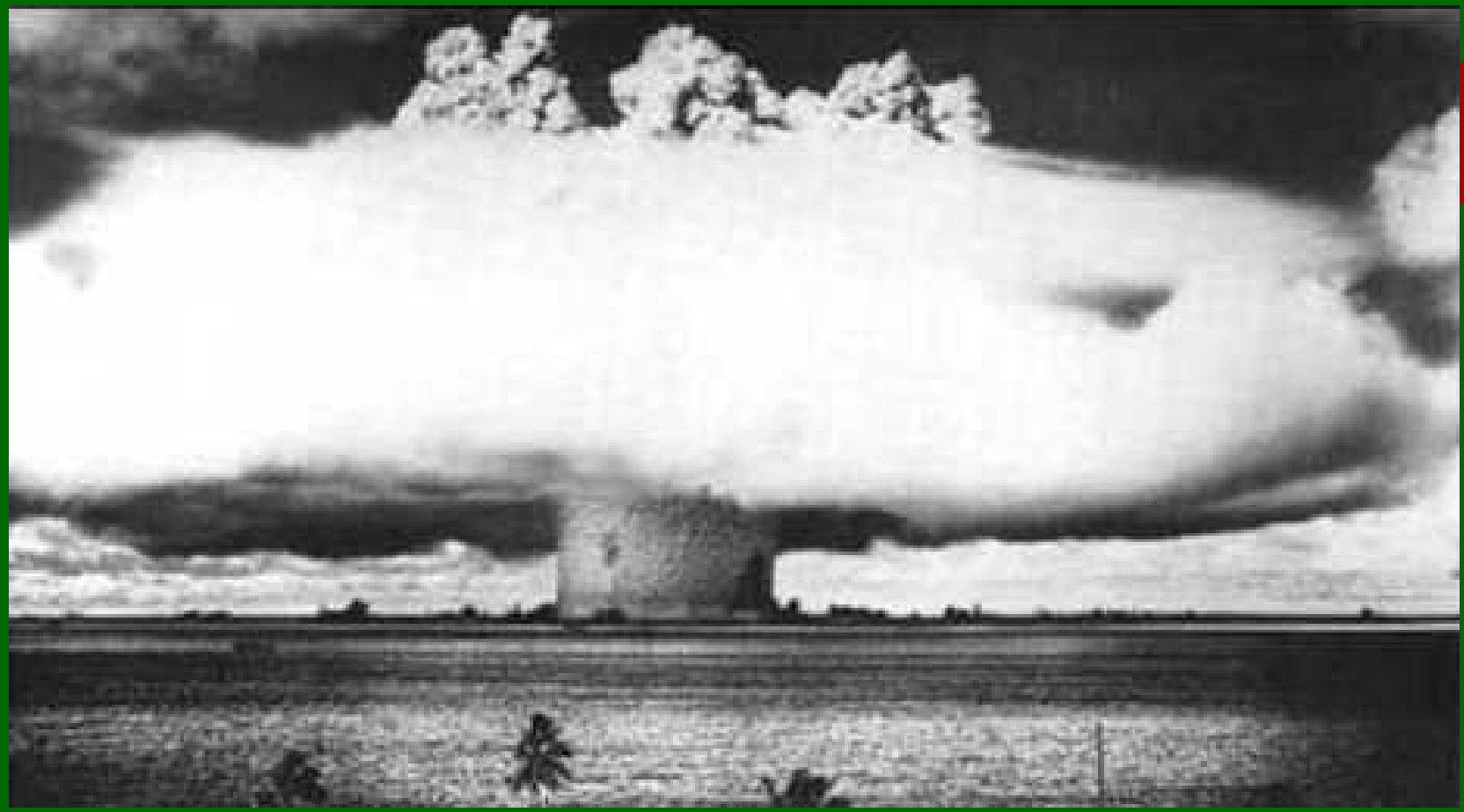
Our domesticates – cultigens and domesticated animals -- provide examples of these reciprocal processes. Moreover, they further illustrate the illusion that "we" are "in control."



Examples of what Ehrenfeld has called the "arrogance of humanism" abound….

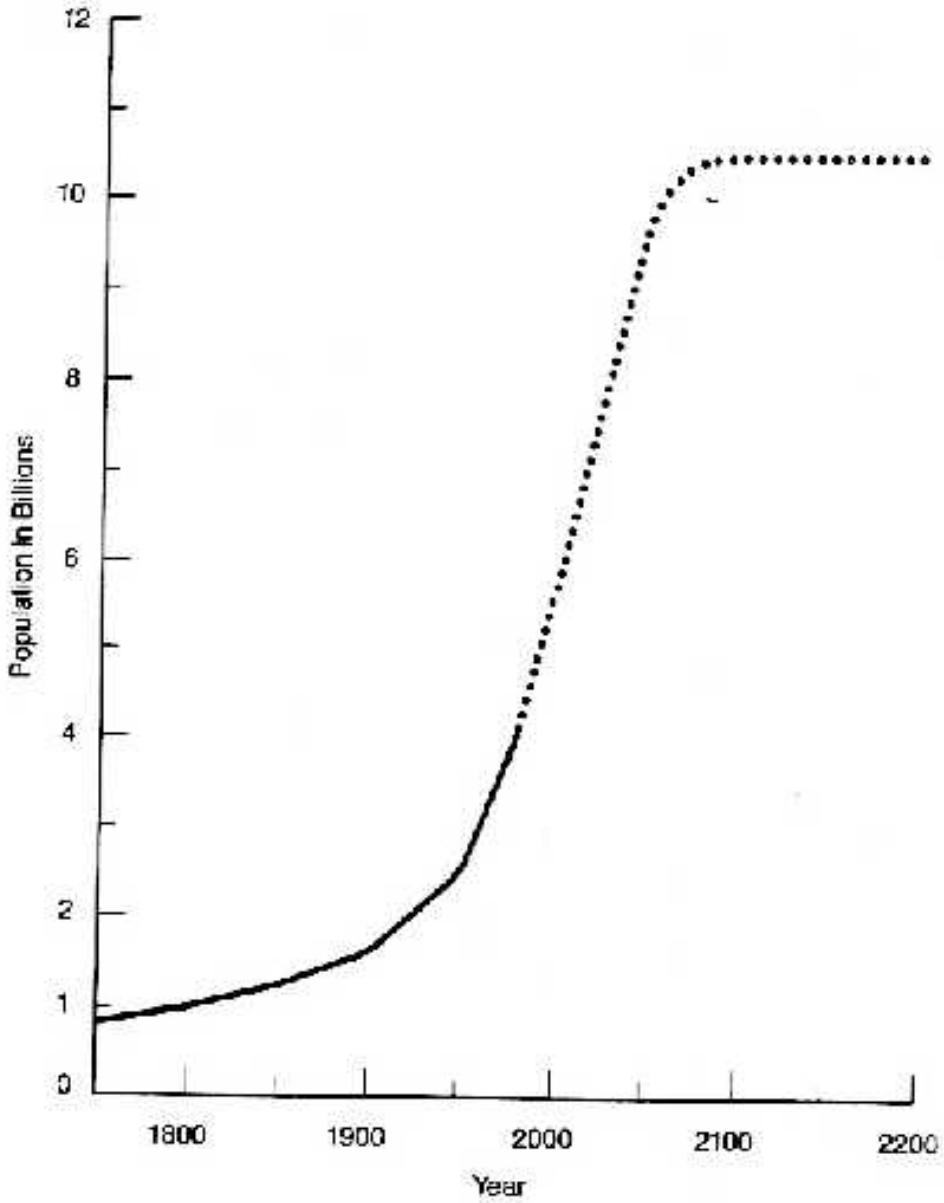
Much of this thinking is driven by an unqualified commitment to ideologies and worldviews derived from the late-bronze age/early-iron age experience in the Palestinian hill country.*

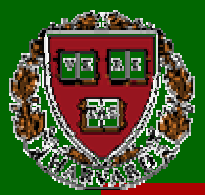
Some of these ethical foundations need, perhaps to be reexamined in our day.

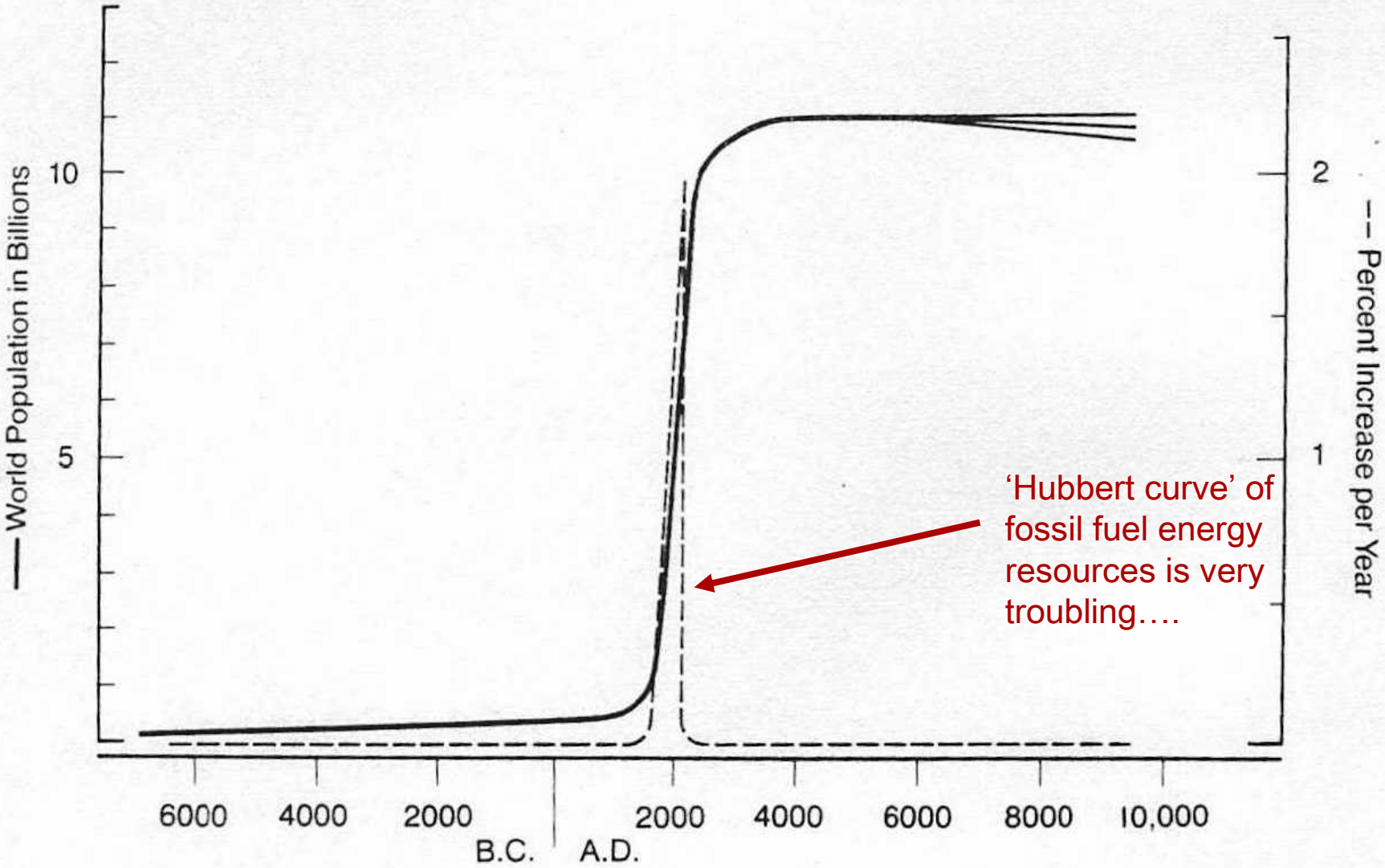


Our impact can be driven by dramatic events
or by more silent demographic trends…

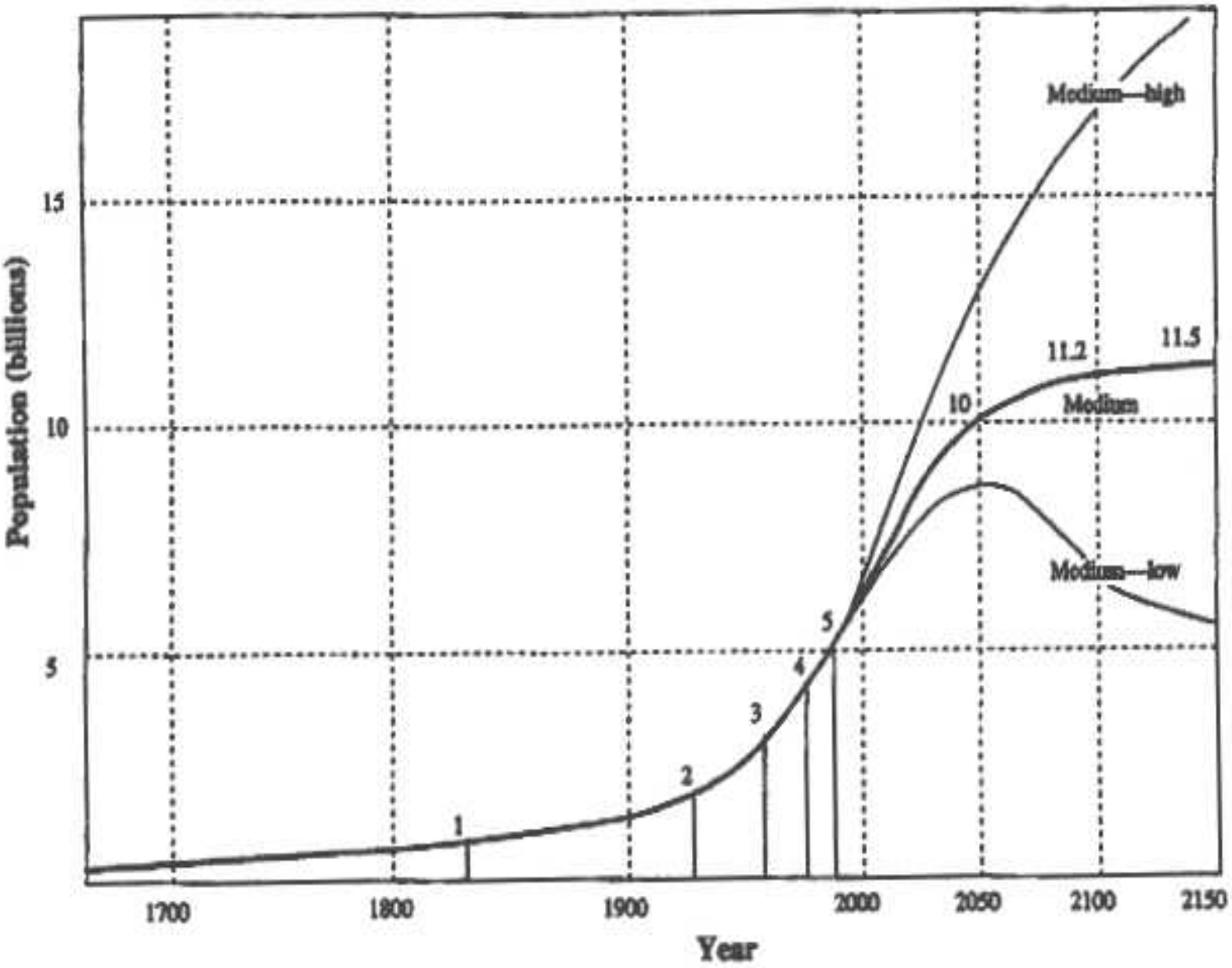
World Population Size, 1750–2200
(medium variant)







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

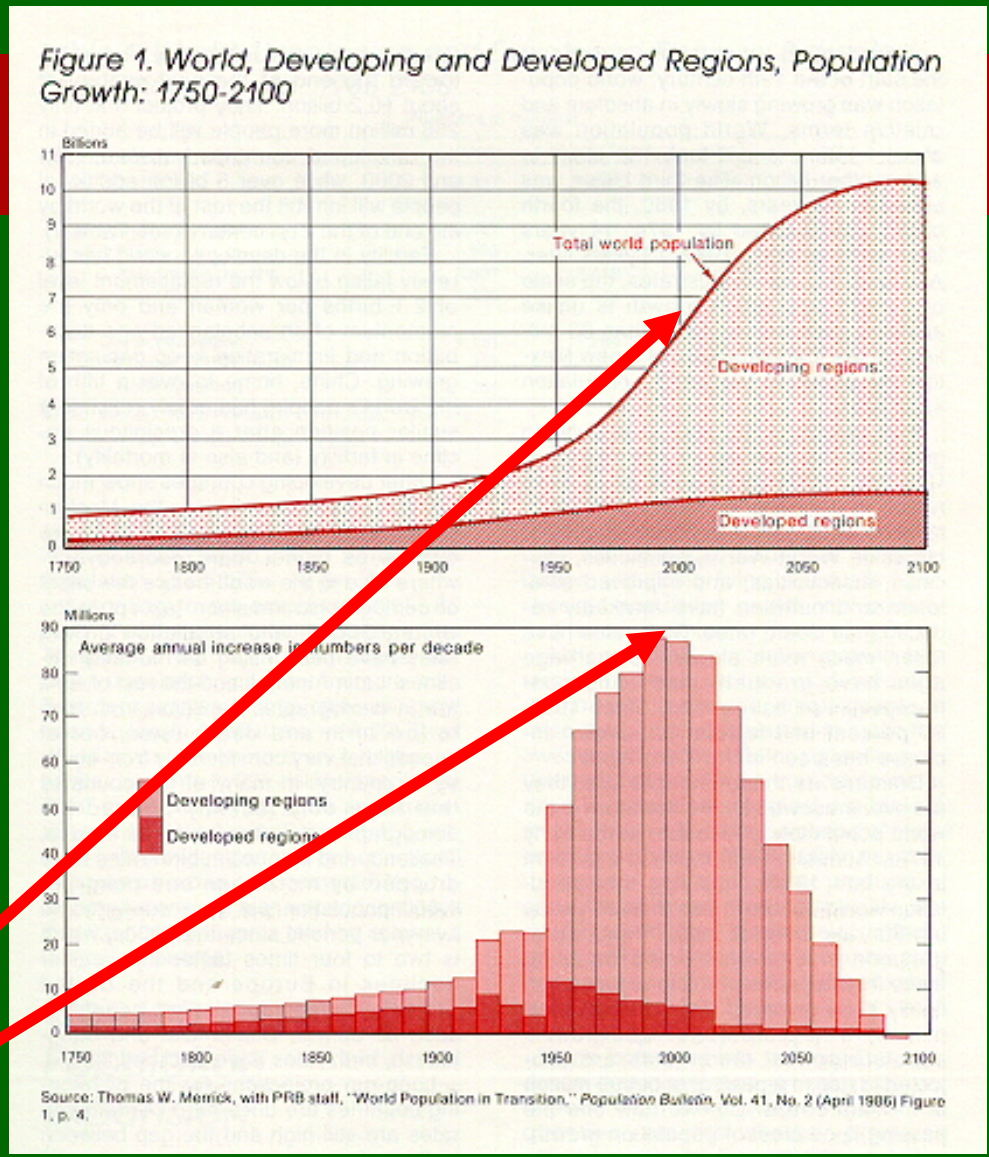

Population (billions)
15
10
5
Medium—high
11.2
11.5
10
Medium
Medium—low
5
4
3
2
1
1700
1800
1900
2000
2050
2100
2150
Year

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!



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

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

Analyze these arguments.

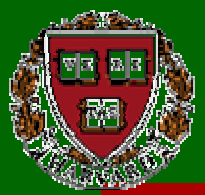
Evaluate these arguments (that is, make judgments about relative merit).

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.



First Goal: *Identify* a Moral Argument….

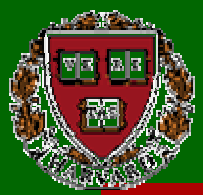
This is not as easy as it might seem at first….

...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."



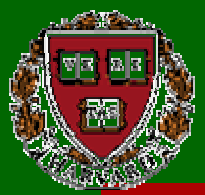
What are ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ arguments?

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.”



What are the elements of a moral argument?

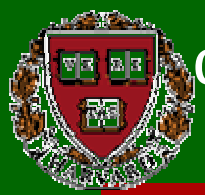
A moral argument is one that is framed in terms of a tensions between what *is* and what *ought to be*.

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?'



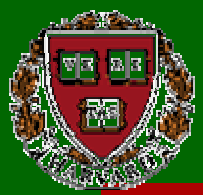
Simple Moral Arguments

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."



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.

What are the features of a *Cultural Phenomena*?

Cultural Phenomena are:

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

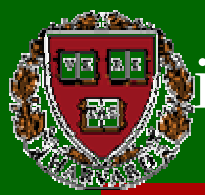
That is:

- 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's cultures);

and

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



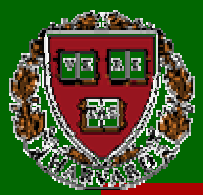
Cultural Phenomena have 2 Key Features

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

Structure

and

Content

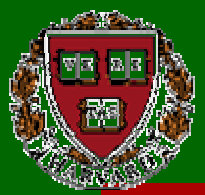


Structure is more enduring than content...

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.")



Analyzing the ‘Grammar’ of Moral Discourse

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

What is the structure of the utterance:

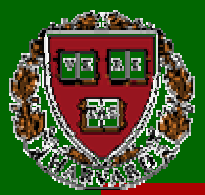
“John went to the store.” ?

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].



Encountering implicit structure

Consider the following utterance:

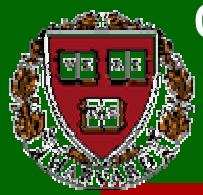
igglesquiggstrazedwamblyintheharrishgoop

What does it *mean*?

Is it English?

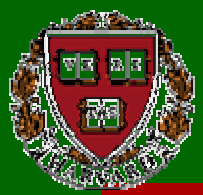
Does it have to *mean* something to be ‘English’?

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?



Can you diagram the utterance?

igglesquiggstrazedwamblyintheharrishgoop



Can you diagram the utterance?

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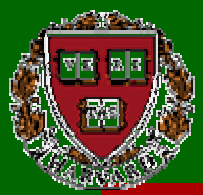

Can you diagram the utterance?

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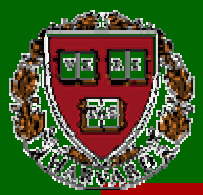

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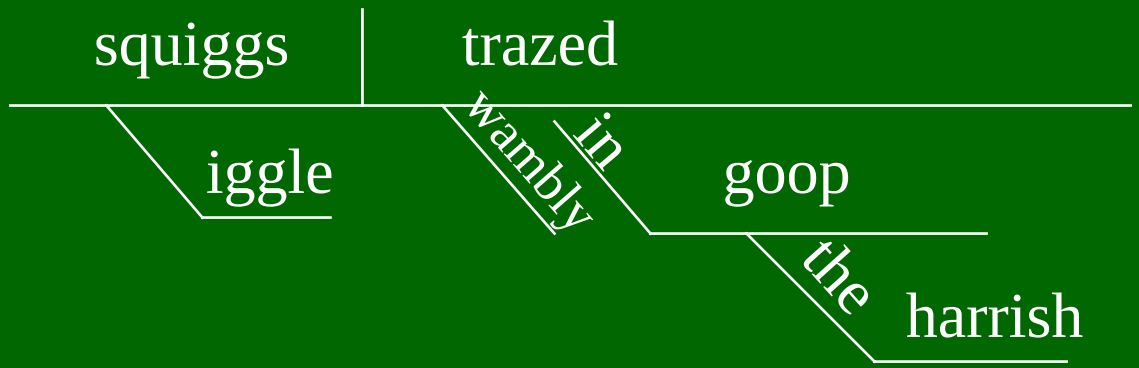
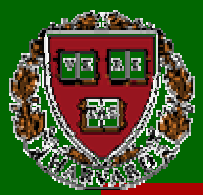


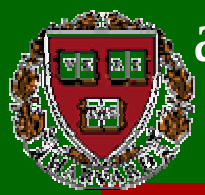


Two Approaches to the Study of Ethics as there are Two Approaches to Grammar

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

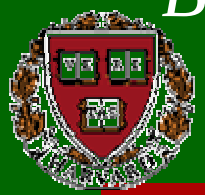
Broadly speaking these two approaches to ethical reasoning are known as:

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

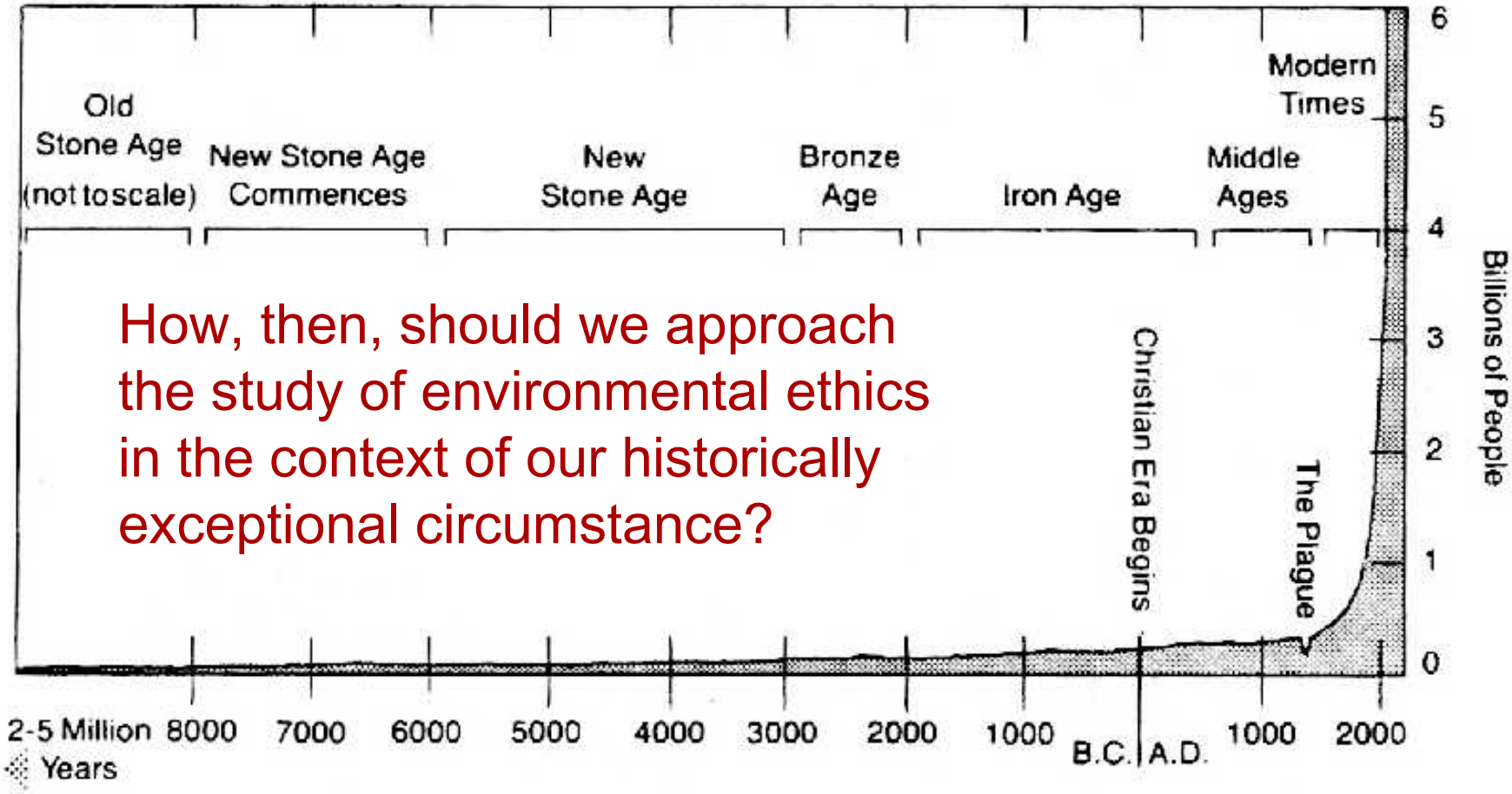
- the ***Consequentialist*** approach (principles do exist, but they must be derived by evaluating the consequences of proposed behavior and establishing norms) . Inductive approach.

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?

Environmental Ethics and Land Management

ENVR E-120

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Selected Writers on Environmental Ethics

Timothy C. Weiskel

Session 4

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Harvard University Extension School
Fall Semester 2004