The Open University

Philosophy and the Human Situation
Who Is The Earth?

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We take our current moral situation so much for granted that we find it hard to realise how strange it actually is. I want to start by getting your agreement over what's unique about it. You must check what I am saying carefully to see whether you think I'm exaggerating.

The simple point is that this is surely the first time in human history when people have become aware that they are doing serious damage to life on this planet. That novelty upsets our ruling moral concepts, which were adapted for quite different circumstances. When we hear that this damage is apparently now so serious as already to have produced a wave of extinctions comparable with the great disasters of prehistoric times – that it threatens the survival of our civilisation and perhaps of our species itself – we don't know how to react.

This news produces culture-shock because it's not just bad but so surprising – and it's come upon our society suddenly. The kind of change in circumstances which normally takes many centuries has struck us within a few decades. Though earlier humans have often done damage of this kind – for instance when their goats and their ship-builders destroyed the forests on the Greek islands – they did it on a much smaller scale and the people involved often didn't recognise what was happening. But since the Industrial Revolution both the scale of the destruction and the system of communication that tells us about it have grown at unparalleled speed so the matter has forced itself into our consciousness.

We're left trying to respond to this unexpected challenge with moral concepts that were devised for a different sort of world. And there are two things about our culture which make it even harder for us to take in this fact than it would have been for people in many other societies. The first thing of course is simply our affluent urbanisation. Most of us in the West now live far away from the plants and animals that we live on. We are not at all used to watching the things that go wrong with them and that go wrong with the natural systems that produce them. We expect eatables and wearables to go on turning up in our shops in spite of plagues and famines, we're used to somebody always being there to substitute another set of resources for the ones that are damaged. Though of course we often feel deprived of things that we need, and though we know that some of us really are poor and malnourished, on the whole our prophets have encouraged us – until very lately – to think that our material resources would go on steadily growing: in the end, everybody was going to be satisfied. The idea of perpetual growth – of economic progress – has been a kind of unquestioned faith in the background of our lives.

This insurance-policy has seemed so reliable that, until quite lately, many theorists talked in terms of our needing to wage a continuing 'war against nature' in order to make sure that we wrest from it every bit of the resources that we need. This language was used, early in the twentieth century, by that very humane man William James, who urged people to throw their energies into this anti-nature campaign in order to distract them from quarrelling with each other. He was recommending this campaign as a harmless alternative, 'the moral equivalent of war'. Freud made the same proposal in the 1930s and even later, in the early sixties, Bertrand Russell, when he received his Nobel Peace Prize, still talked in those confident and pugnacious terms, which I think sound extraordinary to us today.

We are surely dealing here with an amazing optimism, perhaps it's something comparable with the optimism of children who – having always seen their dinner appear regularly on the table – naturally reason (by induction) that it will always go on doing so. So this urban affluence is one factor that makes it hard for us to take in the reality of the environmental crisis. But there's another such factor, less obvious and perhaps more interesting, in the individualistic slant of our thinking.

Individualism tends to make us concentrate our moral concerns on the social and political relations between rational human beings in society, at the expense of attending to the wider wholes (both human and non-human) within which those human beings are parts. Like so many other awkward points in our current thinking, this individualism owes much of its formulation to Descartes and Hobbes. We still tend to see ourselves, in Descartes' style, as isolated rational minds, observers who can look down on the physical world detachedly from outside and who communicate with one another, somewhat indirectly, only when their own interest makes such communication necessary. And in Hobbes's style, we are used to an Enlightenment language of rights and duties as holding essentially between those rational minds in accordance with the social contract. On that basis the answer to the question 'why should I bother about this?' is always 'because it's part of the contract, part of your entrance ticket to society.'

Now that answer is fearfully ill-suited to our dealings with the non-human environment. The contract model works quite well for political life – for which, of course, it was originally invented. But it's notoriously inadequate for the rest of human existence, let alone for anything beyond it. Even within human social life, we know that the essentially legal, contractarian conception of rights and duties as optional links deliberately forged between separate individuals fits badly when we have to deal, for instance, with non-rational beings such as babies, or when we want to do justice to the complexity of personal relations. We know that. But we haven't yet grasped how much worse this misfit becomes when we have to deal with the non-human world. The legalistic pattern of rights doesn't work at all satisfactorily for animals. And when we come to such chronic non-litigants as the Antarctic and the rain-forest it fails us entirely. In dealing with entities like these, individualism is simply bankrupt. It has nothing to suggest.

Entities like the Antarctic visibly are not our fellow-citizens, they can't intelligibly be said to have rights. Yet we must now deal with such entities, and deal with them promptly. It's no longer possible to ignore them. Undoubtedly, too, most of us now see our moral life as taking place on a scale that includes these larger matters. Darwin's perspective on evolution has placed us in a far wider kinship than Descartes or Hobbes ever dreamed of. And our ambitious technology already commits us to acting as members of the whole natural world. We know that, by our forest-clearances and our pollution, we are doing that already. But we don't have any clear ideas on how to fit this situation into our morality.

So how should we respond to this conceptual emergency? I don't think it's very helpful to proceed by promoting various individual outside entities to the status of honorary members of human society. For instance, if we claim that the Antarctic now has 'independent moral status' and if we mean by this only that we've decided to grant it the privilege of treating it like an extra fellow-citizen, we shan't sound very convincing. Discussions of that kind often do sound like the reasoning of officials who are examining a candidate for naturalisation, and this surely doesn't seem to be the right model. The sense in which large, comprehensive wholes like the Antarctic have their value 'independently' of us is very different from that in which extra humans – or even extra animals – applying for citizenship might do so. The most obvious example of a comprehensive whole of this kind is the earth's entire biosphere, now called by the name of Gaia. We'll consider in a moment what are the reasons why we should honour and cherish this kind of whole. But the point to grasp first is that these are reasons of a quite different kind from those which link us to our fellow-citizens. Duties to wholes, of which one is a part, naturally differ in form from duties to other individuals.

Since the Enlightenment, our culture has made enormous efforts to exclude this kind of outward-looking duty altogether from Western morality. It hasn't entirely succeeded. For instance, the idea of duty to one's country still persists and it certainly can't be reduced to a duty to obey the government. The idea of duty to a family, clan or racial group is still strong even in our society – especially when this group is threatened by outside oppression – and it's outside oppression that commonly makes people aware of these wholes of which they are parts. That family or Clan duty is even stronger in most other human cultures, where it hasn't been deliberately played down as it has here. Then the idea of duty to posterity is a powerful one and it is not just the idea of a string of separate duties to separate future individuals. It is

rather the sense of being part of a great historical stream of effort within which we live and to which we all owe loyalty. This identification of ourselves with the stream explains the sense in which we can – rather surprisingly – owe a duty to our ancestors and to our dead. And, in the West as much as elsewhere, it is thoroughly natural to people who work in any co-operative enterprise – school, firm, orchestra, church, political party, theatrical company, football team – to feel a strong duty to that enclosing whole. And of course such thoughts are taken for granted in a wide range of other cultures.

Now our mainstream tradition has of course had a good reason for playing down this corporate element in morals. Political theorists such as Hobbes and Rousseau wanted, above all, to prevent dominant groups from exploiting that loyalty for their own ends. So, these thinkers – and their contemporaries in active politics – swung the balance of moral thinking right across to its individualistic pole. They didn't actually lose the notion of corporate duty entirely. For instance, Fraternity was supposed to be among the ideals of the French Revolution, though in practice it was often thrust aside by Equality and Freedom. Then Rousseau himself did try to balance the individualist bias of his contract theory by introducing the suggestion of something he called the General Will. The General Will was a group phenomenon in the nation distinct from the mere summing of separate decisions in the Will of All. Rousseau said this General Will was something to be relied on more deeply, so that individuals were under obligation to find and follow it. Hegel later developed this and similar earlier hints into a fully-fledged Organic Theory of the State, according to which individuals are always incomplete entities, more or less like cells in a plant or animal, units which need to find their place in wider social groups for full self-realisation.

Now up to a point, this suggestion surely has to be true although it's rather unfamiliar since most of us do, don't we, see reason to strive to place ourselves within such larger groupings – groups of friends, orchestras, pop groups, debating societies, football teams, families, political movements, but when you state it openly, this sort of corporate doctrine tends to sound very different according to which kind of larger group we have in mind. By bad luck, Hegel centred his theory on the nation-state and in particular on his own state of Prussia, which was then (in the early nineteenth century) preparing to dominate the rest of Germany and thereby the rest of Europe. Marx, who followed Hegel's organic approach, also expected his precepts to be taken up in Germany and, though he envisaged a distant time when nation-states would no longer be needed, Marx expected them to be the dominant social unit for the foreseeable future. Since the eventual adoption of Marxism in Russia turned out not to produce any sort of Utopia, it is not surprising that these two unattractive examples have put people off organic theories of society and I think that really is why they have become so put off. Thus, through most of the twentieth century, ideals of individual freedom have been dominant and many prophets in the West – for instance Sartre and Ayn Rand – have preached a kind of fundamentalist individualism, a moral outlook in which the freedom of individuals from any kind of outside interference shines out as the only unquestioned value.

But these shifts in intellectual fashion can't really get rid of the corporate element from morality – and I think it's important that we should acknowledge that it is still there. Humans – even modern, civilised humans – are still social animals to whom, on average, the desolation of loneliness is at least as terrible as the threat of interference by their fellows. Besides this need for company their talents and capacities continually require generous, outgoing co-operation with others for their fulfilment – a point on which Hegel was surely right. A solitary, free individualist can't even begin to be a quartet-player, a tragic actor or a social reformer, nor can an individualist who's interested solely in promoting his own career ever pursue those professions effectively. In fact (as Butler pointed out against Hobbes) people simply are not the kind of pure full-time egoists that social contract thinking requires. Of course it's true that we need to stop the powerful exploiting the weak, so that, for our political life, we do need institutions which can control the misuse of corporate loyalties to distort people's judgement. That's why a free press is needed to answer the propaganda of governments, and it's why that press itself needs to be free from one-sided economic pressure. But this need for precaution can't mean that we can dispense with corporate loyalties altogether. The outgoing, social side of human moral life vitally needs them.

As far as duties to other humans go, this point is probably pretty obvious to us now, even though the rhetoric of our age still often obscures it. In the human context we probably do grasp that the proper answer to the question 'why should I, a complete egoist, bother about other people?' is, 'you don't need to start from there – If you're an egoist you are so by your own deliberate choice, a choice which probably conflicts with other values to which you are equally committed'.

But what about the further step of concern that goes beyond the human scene? What about the reasons for bothering about the non-human environment? I think that the principle is just the same here, the move only looks odder because the language involved is so much less familiar in our culture. Psychological egoism was unreal in the first place and the variety of it that is expressed as species-egoism is an artificial political construction just as much as the private kind. We are well aware that we belong to this earth rather than its being our property. We are not machines or disembodied spirits but primates, animals that are organically dependent on the terrestrial biosphere, as naturally and incurable dependent on that biosphere as each one of us is dependent on human society.

Of course we are a special kind of primate, one that is particularly adaptable through culture and gifted with singular talents. But those gifts, those talents, still come to us from the earth out of which we grow and to which we shall return. The top of our tree still grows from that root as much as the lower branches. We are so radically parts of this earth that our notion of ourselves always takes it for granted as our background. Our fantasies of moving to outer space mean no more than the magic tales with which other cultures have so often consoled themselves for their mortality. There is no reason to suppose that we could possibly live anywhere else. Even people who still insist on expecting that move in the long term are beginning to see that it's not plausible to expect it to arrive in time to relieve our present emergency. Since the Cold War ended, NASA is finding increasing difficulty in raising funds to keep its programs going. And environmental disasters are likely to make that process even harder.

We can, of course, respond to our dependence on the earth by viewing it merely in terms of prudence. In principle we can decide to concern ourselves about the rainforest and the Antarctic only in the way in which we might raise the premiums on our house-insurance, solely for our own protection or (less simply) for that of other humans. But psychologically, this limited response is a much less natural or effective one than egoistic theorists have supposed. Very long-term prudence of that kind is curiously weak; it doesn't carry much conviction. As has been said, when the people in steerage report that the ship is sinking, the first-class passengers always tend strongly to reply cheerfully 'not at our end'. By contrast, direct concern about outrages on the natural world around us is a spontaneous feeling which has a good deal of force. Most people, hearing about the wanton destruction of forests and oceans find this shocking, and – as has become clear in the last few decades – many of them are prepared to take a good deal of trouble to prevent more of it. Though we have been educated, in the tradition of Descartes, to detach ourselves from the physical matter of our planet as something dead, inert and alien to us, this detachment is not at all a natural or necessary attitude. We know that we have evolved from a whole continuum of other terrestrial life-forms and are closely akin to them – a point which nobody ever explained to Descartes – so it's not at all clear why we should deliberately separate ourselves from them in this way.

On this point, the findings of modern science agree much better with the attitude of those cultures in which people do see themselves as part of the whole spectrum of life around them and therefore think that they owe a duty to that whole. In particular, there is a range of scientific findings, now expressed in the idea of Gaia, which suggest that the presence of living things has been a crucial factor in preventing our planet from dying off into a dead, inert, rocky shell as Mars and Venus have done. By controlling the planet's atmosphere and temperature, the system of earthly life as a whole has (it seems) played a crucial part in keeping conditions on earth stable through billions of years, to the point where we ourselves are present and able to profit from them. That cherished blue-green sphere that we all welcomed in the astronauts' photograph would not (it appears) be at all as it is now without the ceaseless working of life on it through past ages.

If this is so, what is our moral relation to that great stream of life? How ought we to regard it? Well, there's nothing superstitious about pointing out that wonder, awe and gratitude are surely appropriate responses to that achievement. We owe everything to that great living stream, and the word owe is the present tense of ought – a point which is worth mentioning because the idea of duty is always bound up with that of debt. We can't pay what we owe directly to this whole, but we can pay it to such parts as we encounter which are suffering damage. And it seems to me that those payments – however described – do indeed constitute our environmental duties.