

INTRODUCTION

Toward a Global Consensus  
for Ethical Action

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The key thing is the sense of universal responsibility; that is the real source of strength, the real source of happiness. If our generation exploits everything available—the trees, the water, and the minerals—without any care for the coming generations or the future, then we are at fault, aren't we?

HIS HOLINESS, THE DALAI LAMA

The problems that we see every day in the markets represent a *massive* opportunity to stop and think where this is all heading. What sort of people are we?

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It's late autumn as we begin to write. Crows perch on the electric lines that connect the houses. A teenager swings his car into the driveway and opens the door, releasing a wave of music. The little girl who lives next door shuffles past wearing her mother's high-heeled shoes. Her mother sits on their doorstep in the slanting light of late afternoon, watching her daughter. In the next block, a neighbor adjusts his ear protectors and yanks the cord on his leaf blower. Students walk by, detouring into the street to avoid the roaring engine and the blast of leaves. There will be rain this evening and maybe snow by morning.

The scene feels odd, almost fictional, the way life goes on. It seems

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almost as if we were watching a herd of dinosaurs grazing on giant fern-trees, oblivious to the shadow of the asteroid that will strike Earth and forever change the conditions under which they will live—or die. A dinosaur lifts his head and hisses at another who is stripping a frond off the same tree. A mother bends her long neck to nudge the eggs nestled under her flank.

But there is no reptilian oblivion among the neighbors and the people passing by. Scientists have done a heroic job of alerting citizens to the world-altering dangers of cascading extinctions, climate change, and other environmental calamities. People know that we already approach tipping points where climate change will trigger irreversible alteration in the conditions under which we will live—or die. They know that by the terrible working out of a few wrong decisions, this generation, our own, will see the end of the Holocene era, when Earth achieved its greatest richness and variety of life, and the beginning of a new epoch of unpredictable change and loss. They know that what is about to hit us is a human creation and that immediate human action is all that can alter its direction, on the chance that calamity will hit the Earth only a glancing blow.

The neighbor switches off the leaf blower and begins to stuff dead leaves into a black plastic bag. The mother walks down the sidewalk to put a little coat on her child.

What will move people to act to save their beloved worlds? Clearly, information is not enough. What is missing is the moral imperative, the conviction that assuring our own comfort at terrible cost to the future is not worthy of us as moral beings.

This book is a call to that moral affirmation. It is a call to people to honor their moral responsibility to the future to strive to avert the worst consequences of the environmental emergencies and leave a world as rich in life and possibility as the world we live in. We have three immediate goals: (1) With the testimony in this book, we aim to demonstrate a global *ethical* consensus among the moral and intellectual leaders of the world that climate action is a moral responsibility, just as scientists demonstrated with the 2002 report of the Union of Concerned Scientists, a global *scientific* consensus that the climate crisis is real, dangerous, and upon us. (2) With the essays in this book,

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we aim to empower readers with a wide variety of arguments demonstrating that we are called as moral beings to environmental action, so that no matter their religion, their worldview, or their position in life, readers will find reasons here—good reasons, powerful reasons—to respond. (3) Finally, we call people to take themselves seriously as moral agents, to reclaim the right to live the lives they believe in, to live as people of integrity—conscientious, compassionate, joyous—and so to take away the ability of the powerful to destroy the Earth.

### The Importance of the Ethical

Scientists continue to provide evidence that environmental degradation and consequent global climate change are profoundly dangerous to humans and to other life on Earth. Activists also are doing their jobs well, urging us to act in ways that will avert these harms to the extent that can be done. But to the surprise and frustration of both scientists and activists, we do not act, we do not create policy, and we casually opt out of efforts to avert future harms—all the while thinking of ourselves as good and sensible people.

How can this be?

Here's one answer: a piece is largely missing from the public discourse about climate change, namely an affirmation of our moral responsibilities in the world that the scientists describe. No amount of factual information will tell us what we ought to do. For that, we need moral convictions—ideas about what it is to act rightly in the world, what it is to be good or just, and the determination to do what is right. Facts and moral convictions together can help us understand what we ought to do—something neither alone can do.

Western society is very good at facts. We aren't as good at values. Our press is filled with scientific reports and predictions about the ecological systems our lives and other lives depend on. Moral discussion is notably sparse. We hope this book will invigorate the discussion of the values and moral aspirations that equally shape our lives, answers to the fundamental questions of the human condition: What is a human being? What is a human's relation to the Earth? How then ought we to live?

This fusion of facts and values is exactly our goal: to articulate

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explicitly the missing moral premise of arguments that can compel us from terrifying facts to powerful obligations and effective actions.

<i>The factual premise</i>	If we do not act soon, anthropogenic environmental changes will bring serious harms to the future.
<i>The moral premise</i>	We have a moral obligation to avert harms to the future, so as to leave a world as rich in life and possibility as the world we inherited.
<i>The conclusion</i>	Therefore, we have a moral obligation to act, and act now.

The facts are in. The normative premise is still under discussion. The stakes of this discussion are high. Once this argument is complete and the premises are agreed upon, one cannot withdraw from obligation and at the same time profess to be a moral person.

### How to Call Forth Discussion of the Ethical?

Our first step as editors was to invite people to join the ethical discussion that would take place in the book. Cultures around the world express moral wisdom in a multitude of ways—in stories, scientific reports, poetry, scripture, economic analysis, literary essays, philosophical argument, letters, edicts, music, and prayers. We wanted to honor all forms of moral discourse. Moreover, there is moral wisdom in people of many different ages, professions, locations, and world-views. We wanted to hear from them, lots of them—dozens of the world’s moral and intellectual leaders.

So we began to call upon people we deeply respect. We asked them to write for the book. Does the world have an obligation to the future to avert the worst effects of a lurching climate and impoverished environment? If yes, why? What explains our obligation? What argument can convince us of our responsibilities?

Almost all of these extraordinary, generous people agreed to write, setting aside their own projects, diverting energy from their political campaigns or their own climate actions or their fight against illness. No writer accepted any payment; indeed, none was offered. If there

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are proceeds from *Moral Ground*, they will go to climate action. From every continent save Antarctica, they sent in beautiful, moving work, expressions of hope for the future and faith in what is best in us. Each of the writers is deeply and painfully aware that saving a fully thriving future will require not just good science and new technology, but also the greatest exercise of the moral imagination that the world has ever seen.

### The Arguments

One moral message sounds loud and clear from almost every writer: as a world, we are undergoing a fundamental change in our understanding of who we are and what role we play in the world. We might once have thought that we were separate from the Earth—in power and in control. We might have thought the Earth was created for our use alone and drew all its value from its usefulness to us, or that we had no obligations except to ourselves, as individuals or as a species. But ecological science and almost all of the world's religions renounce that worldview as simply false and deeply dangerous. Rather, humans are part of intricate, delicately balanced systems of living and dying that have created a richness of life greater than the world has ever seen. Because we are part of the Earth's systems, we are utterly dependent on their thriving.

The writers in this book tell us clearly that we cannot be concerned with humans and human futures without at the same time being directly concerned for all that supports those humans and human futures, because these things are not as distinct as we might have thought—not ecologically distinct or ethically. There's a merging of an ecological and spiritual awareness here that might account for the emergence of a new ethical awareness.

This new ethical awareness includes and goes beyond our obligations to humans, toward the other inhabitants of the world, and to the world itself. We hear from these writers—nearly all of them—that while humans and human interests certainly matter, they are not the only things that matter. A moral life will also honor the interests—and the beauty and mystery—of all the Earth.

Given this, do we have a moral obligation to strive to avert the

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worst effects of the environmental emergencies? Yes, the writers in this book say. Yes, for many different reasons. We have grouped the essays into sections, according to the reasons they offer:

### *1. Moral arguments based on the consequences of acting or failing to act*

Some of the reasons refer to the consequences of acting, or failing to act. Ethicists call this sort of argument “consequentialist,” because it is by the act’s results that we judge it to be right or wrong. An act is right if it increases or enhances what we value, wrong if it reduces or destroys what we think of as good. One primary good is human well-being. So yes, we have an obligation to avert the worst effects of the environmental emergencies, for the survival of humankind, a fundamental value indeed (section 1). And, yes, we have an obligation, for the good of the children to come, for what could we value more than our children’s happiness (section 2)? Yes, we have an obligation to all the Earth, because we are all mutually interdependent, human thriving depends on the thriving of all life (section 7).

But it’s not only human well-being that we value—our flourishing, and that of our children. We also value the great, good Earth and all its life. So yes, we must avert the worst effects of the environmental emergencies for the sake of the sparrows and the seagrass, for newborn whales and tons of krill, for fish like confetti on coral reefs, for lingonberries and the pawprints of bears, for the sake of all living things and their thriving (section 4).

And it’s not just the individual species at risk, but the great systems, the dance of air, water, Earth, and the fire of life. So yes, we have an obligation to act for the survival of the Earth as a self-regulating, living system (section 3).

Isn’t this what it means to live a moral life?—to do what you can to create or protect what you believe is good and beautiful and of great worth?

### *2. Moral arguments based on doing what is right*

In affirming a moral obligation to the future, other writers examine not the consequences of acting or failing to act, but the nature of the

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act itself. As we go about our lives, making moral decisions, are we fulfilling our obligations as moral beings? Ethicists call this sort of argument “deontological,” from the Greek word *deon*, which means “duty.” Some of the writers argue that God calls us to the stewardship of divine creation and that failure to protect the world he so lovingly created is a failure in our moral duty to God (section 8). Others argue that we have duties of justice. We have duties to honor the rights of all species, both present and future (section 13). And we have duties to respect human rights, duties of intergenerational and international justice (section 10). Alternatively, because the gifts of the Earth are freely given, some writers argue, we are called as recipients of great gifts of life and nourishment and beauty to honor duties of gratitude and reciprocity (section 5).

### *3. Moral arguments based on virtue*

Ethics is certainly about how to act. But in an important sense, ethics is also about who to be. What is the best a human being can be (or, what is beastly or appalling in human nature)? What virtues should form our character? What motivations should shape our acts? Ethicists call arguments based on these sorts of considerations “virtue ethics.”

So yes, some writers claim, the full expression of human virtue requires that we honor our obligations to the future (section 6). Others claim that we must act from compassion, recognizing the suffering that environmental degradation imposes on others of all species, of all times (section 9). Moreover, we must protect all of life because the Earth is beautiful, and what sort of thug would destroy what is beautiful or fail to grieve for its loss (section 11)? We love the world; we are delighted and comforted by its wonders and rhythms; love calls us to acts of caring (section 12). And if this is the way the world is—beautiful, extraordinary, astonishing in its detail and in the wide expanse of its creation—aren’t we called to honor and celebrate it in everything we do (section 13)?

In the final set of essays (section 14), the moral arguments ask us to think about personal integrity, perhaps the keystone virtue. Integrity is a kind of wholeness, the consistency between belief and action. As

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we make decisions about how we live in an endangered world, do our actions match up with what we most deeply believe is right and good? Or do we act unthinkingly or allow ourselves to be pushed to live in ways we think are wrong? When all is said and done, will each of us be able to say that we lived a life we believed in, conscientiously refusing what is wrong and destructive, exhibiting in our life choices what is compassionate and just? As hope rapidly fails that we might be able to avert the coming ecological collapses, to live a life that embodies our values may be the strongest ethical stance, some writers argue. To do what is right, even if it does no good; to celebrate and to care, even if it breaks your heart.

What we find, when we look at the writings in this book together, is that the discussion of our obligation to the future has transcended argument. This gathering of reasons has become a global celebration of the foresight, compassion, and humility that are part of the heritage of the human being. Perhaps this is reason enough to hope that we might summon the wisdom to save our lives and what makes our lives worth living.

### The Call to a Moral Life in a Time of Environmental Emergency

What the authors collectively argue is that no matter what moral theory one might turn to, one will find a strong affirmation of our obligation to future generations to preserve or restore a thriving, healthy world filled with beauty and possibility. Where is there room for escape from this obligation? What is the name of the virtue that would allow us to believe that we could care only about ourselves, act as if present or future beings had no pull on us, and then turn around and assert our goodness?

Certainly there is no room for escape from our obligations in an appeal to the divine. What sort of deity would sanction disregard for the future and still command our praise? And really, how can it be prudent, or beneficial to any being alive or imagined, to discount the future? The world's wisdom makes the same demand of us: we have a moral obligation to avert harms to the future.

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A dissenter might argue in response that the concept of obligations to the future makes no sense at all. The future does not exist. How can we have a responsibility to nothing at all? Or even if future beings can be imagined to exist, how can we know what their interests are, or what they might ask of us? How can there be obligations to abstractions?

On the contrary, we would reply, people show strong loyalty to abstractions every time they act in ways that honor conceptual ideals such as freedom, liberty, and prosperity. Loyalty to abstractions is the stuff of this world. Arguments about responsibility to the future do indeed require us to imagine a world that does not yet exist. They further require us to be morally moved by that imagined vision. Loyalty to what we can only imagine is what hope is made of. If any among us does not have the ability to imagine the pain or rejoicing of people other than themselves, then perhaps a first step in moral development is to practice that imagining. This is the work of moral education.

The fulfillment of our responsibilities requires something extraordinary of us. We must develop the moral imagination that will allow us to see ourselves in the places of our progeny, to see the world through their wide eyes, to imagine their sorrow and their hopes—not so different from our own. Indeed, we must develop empathy with wild creatures. We must nourish in ourselves the humility to escape an infantile egoism, even though this humility is often foreign to us, requiring an unfamiliar renunciation of the self, requiring us to understand that the universe was not created for our particular species and generation alone and that we are not the measure of all its worth. We must find a way to enlist all the powers of the human mind and heart. These are not only our rational powers, but the additional gifts that define us as fully human—our abilities to care, to grieve, to yearn, to celebrate, to fear, to analyze, to dream, to hope, to love, to have faith. Above all, we must learn to listen to the Earth, which resounds with a wisdom we can hear if we try, wisdom born of the longest reaches of time and space, red leaves falling from oak trees, soft rain, children coming home at dusk.

Our hope is that the writers in this book will inspire this change,

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that they will begin a new dialogue about who we are when we are at our best, and what we must do to be worthy of our gifts. Then we can imagine ourselves as not only clever, not only powerful, but also deeply humane. Then we can find the moral ground for living on Earth respectfully, responsibly, and joyously.

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