The Banality of Ethics in the Anthropocene

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We can’t fit all of humanity in a single courtroom. CherryX/Wikimedia, CC BY-SA

Among the great crimes of the 20th century the most enduring will surely prove to be human disruption of the Earth’s climate. The effects of human-induced climate change are apparent now and will become severe this century, but the warming is expected to last thousands of years. That is so because extra carbon dioxide persists in the atmosphere for a very long time, but also because changes in the climate are triggering changes in the Earth System as a whole, changes that cannot be undone.

If it is a crime to transform the Earth into a hot and less habitable place what are the offences committed by those responsible? A panel of eminent jurists this year published some principles to guide us. The Oslo Principles note that “all States and enterprises have an immediate moral and legal duty to prevent the deleterious effects of climate change”.

Corporations causing harm to people through their emission of greenhouse gases may be subject to tort law and may be sued for damages. The Principles observe that States are obliged to protect human life and the integrity of the biosphere through an existing network of national and international obligations.

Looking back on the last two decades of denial, delay and obstruction, there have been perhaps two hundred individuals who should be held most culpable, if not by the courts then by history, for failing to prevent harm or of obstructing others from taking measures to prevent harm.
Above all, in denying the evidence or failing to take action commensurate with the known danger, these individuals have been violating their duty to the truth. When something of immense importance is at stake—and what could be more important than the survival of the most vulnerable of the Earth’s citizens in the face of famine, flood, and epidemic—we owe an absolute allegiance to the truth, and must put aside any ideological or financial discomfort that the truth may cause.

A new dispensation

Duty to the truth and the obligation to avoid actions that harm others are powerful principles firmly rooted in the universal framework of legal and ethical codes. Yet before the enormity of what humankind has now done, I cannot help feeling that these grand constructions are frail and almost pathetic. Let me explain why.

Although we must not give up on working hard, against resistance, to limit warming to 2°C, the truth is that few experts believe that the nations of the world will act with the urgency and decisiveness needed to achieve it. Even under optimistic assumptions about global carbon abatement, the Earth is expected to warm by 4°C or more by the end of the century, making it hotter than it has been for 15 million years, and crossing several tipping points along the way that will make it impossible to stabilise the global temperature at any level.

Under human influence the Earth’s climate system is not only changing in its totality and over a geological time-scale; it is also rendered more unstable and unpredictable. Whereas industrialism’s essential aim has been to bring the natural world under human supervision, in practice the effect has been to leave it less controllable.

Moreover, Earth System scientists have been telling us that it is no longer possible to isolate the climate system from the rest of the Earth system. It is not just the climate system that is being disturbed but every component of the Earth system—the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the cryosphere, the biosphere and even the lithosphere, that is, the crust and upper mantle.

They are all interconnected and all of them have been disrupted by human activity in the 20th century. Ice masses have been set on a melting course that seems unstoppable; the acidity of the oceans has soared by some 30 per cent and still rises; even the Earth’s crust is being transformed by global changes in the climate.

The last-mentioned is most illuminating. In his extraordinary book, Waking the Giant, geophysicist Bill McGuire describes the ways global warming is disturbing “the giant beneath our feet”. The Earth’s crust is responding to rising temperatures: volcanoes previously imprisoned below ice sheets are more likely to erupt; earthquakes in the Himalayas, the Andes and Alaska may be triggered as the ice load shrinks; and, the solid Earth beneath Greenland is bouncing back quickly as the ice above it melts, perhaps with the Antarctic land mass not far behind.

Let me mention one further fact that stopped me in my tracks when I first read it. It has been predicted that global warming from human activity in the 20th and 21st centuries will heat the Earth so much and for so long that it will suppress the next ice age, which is not due to arrive for 50,000 years, and quite possibly several ice ages beyond. Ice ages and the inter-glacial periods between them are caused principally by predictable variations in the way the Earth orbits the Sun and tilts and wobbles on its axis.

Yet these properties of the solar system must now compete against a new force—a creature that shifts vast amounts of carbon from deep underground storage into the atmosphere. In this way, writes geophysicist David Archer in The Long Thaw: How Humans Are Changing the Next 100,000 Years of the Earth’s Climate, “humankind has the capacity to overpower the climate impact of Earth’s orbit, taking the reins of the climate system that has operated on Earth for millions of years.”
Earth mobilised

In short, the Earth System as a whole has been mobilised so that everything is now in play. Once disturbed these processes may take an eon to settle down. This is why Earth System scientists are telling us that, like tectonics, volcanism and fluctuations in solar radiation, humans have become a force of nature, so much so that, in the prophetic words of Will Steffen and his colleagues, the “human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system”.

So powerful have we become that we have taken the planet into a new geological epoch, leaving behind that happy 10,000 years of climatic stability and clemency known as the Holocene to enter the Anthropocene. The International Commission on Stratigraphy is now going through a formal process of deciding whether it should add the Anthropocene to the Geological Time Scale, the scale on which the entire 4.5 billion year history of the Earth is divided.

And so Earth scientists are now writing of human impact on a geological time scale. It is a development that calls into question modernity’s understanding of history, expressed in the nineteenth century by Jacob Burckhardt, that history is “the break with nature caused by the awakening of consciousness.” In Dipesh Chakrabarty’s profound observation: Human history and geological history have now converged.

These dazzling facts force us to rethink the place of humankind in deep history. A long time after we modern Prometheans disappear, or retreat to a position where we are no longer interfering in the Earth System, the great processes that drive planetary change – orbital forcing, plate tectonics, volcanism, natural evolution and so on – will overwhelm human influence.

But the planet will not settle into a state that looks anything like the Holocene; it has been diverted onto a different trajectory and there is no going back. We must concede what seemed impossible to contemplate – humans have become agents changing the course of deep history.

What does all this mean for justice and ethics? I would like to suggest that, without relieving individuals of culpability, when we step back and survey these Earth-shattering events our established ethical categories and legal principles appear banal and feeble. If the human impact has been so powerful that it has deflected the Earth from its natural geological path, describing the state of affairs as “unethical” or “unlawful” seems to be some kind of category error.

And that is the theme I take up in the second part of this essay.
Yesterday in Part 1 I argued that the most enduring of the great crimes of the 20th century will surely prove to be human disruption of the Earth’s climate. Its effects are already locked in for thousands of years. With modern technology humans have become so powerful that we now rival the great forces of nature, so much so that we have diverted the planet from its natural course, taking it out of the Holocene’s 10,000 years of climatic stability and clemency into a new, unstable and dangerous geological epoch, the Anthropocene. If this feat is a crime then before the enormity of what humankind has now done, the grand constructions of international law and all modern ethical systems appear frail and almost pathetic.

Penal codes proscribe offences against property and the person. Some codify crimes against humanity. But where in a statute book would we look for the crime of subverting the laws of nature? What penalty would a court impose for killing off a geological epoch?

If not unlawful then these monstrous acts are surely unethical. Yet to see them as the result of a miscalculation about how to maximise human welfare, or a failure to act according to a Kantian universal maxim, as the dominant ethical theories would have it, somehow trivialises the magnitude of what has been done and which now looms before us. An ethical framework that can tell us whether it is wrong to overstate our travel expenses cannot tell us whether it is wrong to change the Earth’s geological history.

The feebleness of ethics may be conceded in the case of consequentialist and duty ethics, but what about virtue ethics? Are we not in this predicament because hubris has defeated humility, because self-interest has trumped concern for others? Perhaps, but the virtues that guide us in daily life tell us nothing about the place of humans on the planet, and that is now what is at stake.

The attempt to frame a transformed climate by mere ethics risks normalising an event without parallel, of rendering prosaic a transition that is in fact Earth-shattering. If the imprint of humans on the functioning of the Earth system has become so large that we have initiated a new geological epoch, the recourse to law and ethics leaps over a more foundational question: What is man? What kind of being made these laws and ethical codes, and what kind of being changed the course of Earth history?
Philosophy since Descartes had answered the former question definitively, and since then it has exercised only a few in the shadows. But unless we open it up again we will flounder around attempting to understand the dilemmas of an ontologically new epoch with the categories of the old one. It is an approach as anachronistic as an animal trial would be today. When human history and natural history become entangled it is no longer credible to argue that the future of the Earth depends only on the moral struggle of modern men and women.

The Earth scientists tell us that the giant beneath our feet is stirring. No longer do we face the sullen resistance of nature to our demands, resistance that in the past has been progressively overcome with more powerful technologies. Now we see a force awakening to its own power.

Against the foundation of modern law and ethics in the moral autonomy of the subject we find ourselves in an increasingly heteronomous world. We no longer have a monopoly on agency. We have assumed that the only kind of willing in the world lies in the consciousness of human beings; yet in the Anthropocene we must confront the possibility of a “will” beyond our own, that which we can only gesture at with metaphors like “the awakened beast”.

The Sorcerer’s Apprentice

Let me reinforce the argument with a reinterpretation of a classic fable. Before we became intoxicated by the hubris of techno-industrialism, respect for forces beyond the human was embedded both in folk wisdom and intellectual life. In 1797 Goethe composed a short poem drawing on an ancient story, The Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Most people today are familiar with it through the Disney version in the 1940 film Fantasia, which stays close to Goethe’s plot.

After the Sorcerer leaves for the day the Apprentice believes he can activate the master’s magical powers, so he commands the broom to fetch water. All goes well until the Apprentice waves the sorcerer’s wand to stop the broom. It refuses. He chops it in half but the two halves rise and continue to fetch water. He chops again and again to no effect until the house is being inundated. The Apprentice cannot control the powers he has unleashed and calamity threatens. But the Sorcerer returns just in time and commands the broom to stop.

Can the The Sorcerer’s Apprentice properly be described as a morality tale? Would we describe the actions of the Apprentice as ‘unethical’? Foolish, risky and hubristic, yes, but not immoral. The fable’s message is pre-ethical, from a world in which the Apprentice is not a moral agent but the kind of being who aspires to go beyond all moral laws. The Sorcerer’s Apprentice is a story about what happens when we aim to rise above the proper bounds of human agency, when magic confers so much agency that we are above ethical injunctions.

I am suggesting that in the last two to three centuries humans came to believe techno-industrial power had elevated us from Apprentice to Sorcerer. Yet in truth we were never more than Apprentices with iPhones, or more accurately, with coal-fired power plants. Hegel seemed to know this: “Man uses nature for his own ends; but where nature is too powerful, it does not allow itself to be used as means.”

And so we Apprentices misappropriated nature’s powers by setting ourselves up to rival the laws of nature. We have made ourselves into beings that aspire to the role of the gods, playing with forces we should leave alone, the great forces that govern the evolution of the planet. Impatient with this kind of warning, some ultra-moderns are even now planning to impose their will on those forces by means of geoengineering schemes aimed at regulating the amount of solar energy reaching the planet.

So what is man? The Apprentice. Yet unlike the pleasing ending to Goethe’s story, with the Sorcerer returning at the last moment to set things right, in the last century or so humans have usurped the role of Sorcerer and changed the world irrevocably.

What is the essential flaw in this being, the being that can spread across the entire surface of the Earth and create fantastically elaborate social structures, including systems of ethico-legal
principles to govern its behaviour, and yet send the planet careening off onto a new and
dangerous trajectory that jeopardizes all forms of life? Modernity’s greatest philosophical
invention, the autonomous subject, now stands on shaky ground, the trembling of “the giant
beneath our feet”.

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