

The Venn Diagram from Hell

*Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael Paul Nelson
consider ethics at the intersection of climate chaos,
ecosystem collapse, and corona virus*

Well, here the world is, in the hell-black hole at the centre of a cosmically dangerous Venn diagram. In one circle, global climate chaos. In another, species extinction and ecosystem collapse. And now, in the third, the Covid-19 pandemic that is decimating the elderly wisdom-keepers, kicking economic security in the gut, enabling tyrants, locking down democracies, and giving fossil-fuel and other extractive industries the cover to move in for the kill -- all in a time when the moral tissue of society is fragile and perilously thin. How could this be happening? How, especially, in a time of expanding scientific understanding? Each of these crises is the result of human failure, if not in the origin of the particular plague, then in the way it is allowed to play out in time. The failure is spectacular.

In the last few months, we have been heartened that ordinary people, if not their leaders, are responding in extraordinarily creative and conscientious ways to the pandemic, each doing what they do best, for the good of the whole. Philosophers are not particularly good at sewing facemasks or singing arias from their casement windows, but they are very good at closing themselves in their studies and thinking. So think, then: What

can philosophers bring to the challenge?

For us, environmental philosophers, it's a familiar question. Ten years ago, we brought our colleagues together to ask the same question, that time in regard to climate chaos, a far more lethal catastrophe than Covid-19. We noted then that scientists were working heroically to alert people to the consequences of global warming: *If we don't act now, the life-supporting systems of the world will collapse -- not later, but in this century.* The information was not enough to move people to real, effective policies. What was missing from the conversation at that time, we believed, was the moral affirmation: *It's wrong to wreck the world. We have a moral obligation to the future to leave a world as supportive of life as our own.*

We set about to bring ethics into the centre of the discussion, aiming to raise an alarm grounded in climate justice as well as in climate science. We asked one hundred of the world's moral leaders -- religious leaders, indigenous leaders, thought-leaders from politics, literature, philosophy, science -- to write about the moral urgency of climate action. We collected their responses in a book, *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril* (Trinity UP).

Once again, we find the public discourse about the Covid-19 pandemic to be generally dominated by scientific and medical facts. The policies, to the extent they exist, are inconsistent, haphazard, and mostly unfair; the moral principles that might ground them are unstated or absent (except in the case of well-studied triage criteria, when it is too late). In this context, we turned again to *Moral Ground*, finding there three ethical insights about climate change that we believe are equally useful as presuppositions in making moral decisions and determining wise policies about the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Human exceptionalism is dead. All flourishing is mutual.

In the western intellectual tradition, people have grown accustomed to the dogma of human exceptionalism, which is based on three entwined assumptions about the nature of the world and the place of humans in it. First (for a variety of reasons): the assumption that humans are fundamentally different from and separate from the rest of nature. Second (and consequently): that people are superior to nature, which is subject to their control. Superior minds and exponentially clever technological fixes free people from the connections between causes and consequences that bedevil lower creatures. And third (and also consequently): beyond certain pragmatic imperatives, people don't have moral obligations toward the Earth, but the license to use it for their ends only.

Well, that's over. If the pandemic teaches us anything, it teaches us, first, that like other earthly beings, we are soft, vulnerable creatures whose bodies can be taken over

and destroyed by scraps of genetic material in undead, unalive things. Humans are fully part of natural systems, born into interdependent, life-sustaining relationships with people and other animals, with plants, with sun and moon and rock. Each has its place, its role, in the thriving of everything else -- not a hierarchy, but a dance. Second, the pandemic teaches that a self-described superior mind is useless if it is careless and short-sighted, and dangerous if it is hubristic. There are forces of nature -- as large as the jet stream and as small as a virus -- that impose consequences following from human causes, some unimaginable, some clearly foreseen. And third, it follows that people have obligations toward the natural world and one another, based on kinship, gratitude, and reciprocity.

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In her *Moral Ground* essay, "The Give-away", botanist and Potawatomi elder Robin Kimmerer writes that in both her scientific and indigenous worldviews, "all flourishing is mutual ... We are bound in a covenant of reciprocity, a pact of mutual responsibility to sustain those who sustain us ... The moral covenant of reciprocity calls us to honor all we have been given, for all we have taken."

The pandemic has made it dramatically clear that we are all in this together, humans



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and other animals, winds and weather, past and future. We can't deny now that, for better or for worse, one person's decisions have a cascading effect on other people, and vice versa. Because radical individualism denies this basic truth, assuming instead that one person can thrive apart from others, maybe in triumph over others, it is not a viable position in a pandemic. Human exceptionalism also is dead; for all human brilliance, human bodies will be killed by viruses and eaten by worms, just like everything else. It will be most interesting to see what philosophies of moral mutualism emerge to take the place of this pride. Already the new ethic is emerging in acts of sharing and what we used to call "sacrifice".

2. The discourse of "sacrifice" is misleading. People are called instead to change for the better.

In an essay called "The Moral Climate", activist-ecologist Carl Safina observed that

people knew for decades that, in order to mitigate climate chaos, something big had to change, and fast. People couldn't continue to burn profligate amounts of fossil fuels without wrecking the place -- that was almost universally clear. Yet, nothing much changed, or not nearly enough. The reason, Safina argued, was that the ad-men for oil and gas (and everybody else profiting handsomely from the status quo) had convinced the American people that change meant sacrifice, and that rational people did not sacrifice their ways of life for the long-term well-being of others. So even to save the world for beloved children, they wouldn't stop commuting, flying, shopping, shipping, burning ancient fuels -- nor could they, it was claimed, without a ruinous effect on the Gross Domestic Product and their gross domestic happiness.

Safina explained: "Dysfunctional values married to catastrophic leadership have led us to the place you go when you are made to believe that solution is sacrifice and that sac-

rifice for a just cause is not noble but, rather, out of the question ... The refusal to “sacrifice” is actually a pathological refusal to change for the better ... We think we don’t want to sacrifice, but sacrifice is exactly what we’re doing by perpetuating problems that only get worse; we’re sacrificing our money, sacrificing what is big and permanent to prolong what is small, temporary, and harmful. We are sacrificing animals, peace, and children to retain wastefulness -- while enriching those who disdain us.”

Moral consequentialism is dead

And now here we are in the midst of a pandemic, asked to change in substantial ways, and fast. To stop commuting, flying, shopping, shipping, but rather to stay at home -- not so much for our own health, although that is also at stake, but for the benefit of the whole. As is the case with climate chaos, devastating change is being forced on the poor, homeless, the inadequately employed, small businesses. It’s true that the business shutdown has been an awful hit on the stock market and maybe the GDP. Doctors and nurses are sacrificing everything. But for many, the consequences of the changes have been eye-opening:

People *can* change. In significant, life-changing ways. With unbelievable speed. For the sake of others. The fossil-fuel industry was wrong. The big surprise is how quickly the discourse of sacrifice gave way to a discovery of all that can be gained by a change away from the patterns of overwork, overextraction, overconsumption, and pol-

lution that seemed just a few months ago to be inevitable. The astonishment: Time with families, time with books and music, time in natural places, quiet, the voices of birds and children, local food, clean air and its salutary effect; in China, early evidence indicates that more lives were saved by the draw-down in pollution than by the pandemic lockdown itself. How interesting it will be to see how the oil and gas industry spins the emerging story of the direct and indirect benefits of reducing use of fossil fuels.

We can hope for an intense new public discourse about what is of enduring value, and the emergence of artful ways those values can direct policies and shape rewarding lives -- rewarding for the people and imperilled ecosystems, not for Big Oil.

3. Moral consequentialism is dead.

In one of our essays in *Moral Ground*, entitled “To A Future Without Hope”, we argued that moral consequentialism provided only the flimsiest moral grounding for a society facing climate chaos and other large-scale, interconnected, and daunting challenges. Assuming that people ought to act so as to maximise overall positive consequences (typically for humans, or more accurately, for some subset of humans) makes a number of highly questionable presuppositions about the world.

First, consequentialism rests on the arrogance of foreknowledge, assuming that people can understand and even predict the future with some degree of probability, if not certainty. It presupposes that people can know, and therefore that people can calculate, the consequences of options, thereby

coming to clear moral judgements. Second, it presupposes that people are sovereign and autonomous. It assumes that people can maximise utility for themselves only or for their communities only, because they are independent in important ways from others. And finally, the hegemony of consequentialism seems a failure to appreciate that there are other ethical modes of operation, a blind spot in our thinking about how we might arrive at right actions.

If the current crises have shown us nothing else, they have brought into razor-sharp relief the complex difficulties of predicting future conditions. Moreover, to the extent that people are encouraged to distrust predictive science, there is a persistent reluctance to act on reliable predictions, when they can be made. Second, the crises have shown us how difficult it is, in an interconnected and hierarchical society, to make just decisions about whose interests should be maximised, and how that might be accomplished without damaging the interests of others. Finally, the on-rushing catastrophes can be seen as a repudiation of consequentialism, demonstrating exactly where we land, when we maximise the interests of some in a context of inequity and deep uncertainty. Other moral traditions would offer new approaches, if our culture could escape the intellectual preoccupation with results, outcomes, payoffs -- the ferocious tyranny of bottom lines.

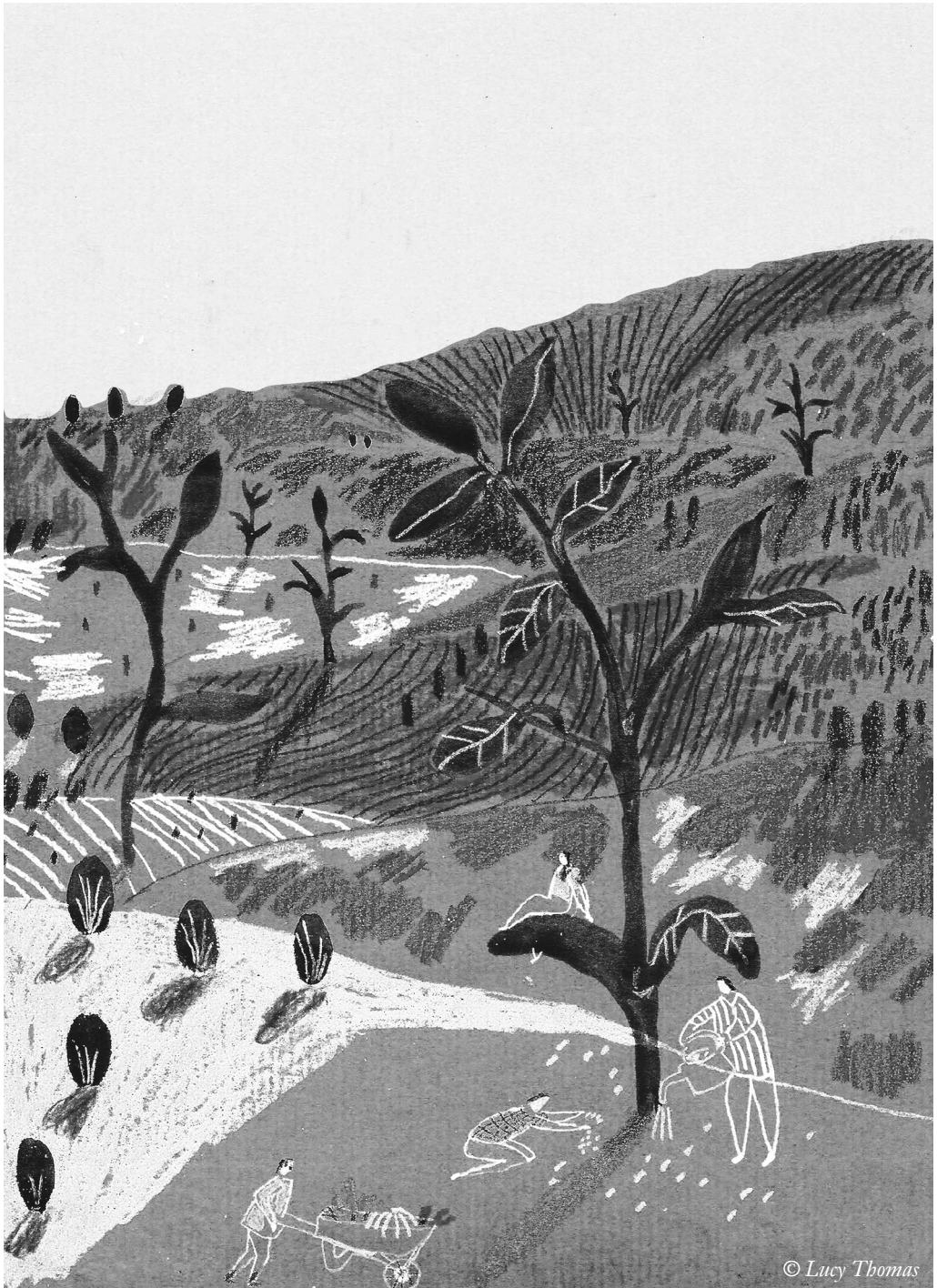
In our essay, we suggested that “we have built a society fixated on the future, perpetually risking all the attendant problems of justifying means by their ends, and forever flirting with endorsing the hedonistic instincts” of people defined solely as consumers. We worried that this approach has built

a society “readily disempowered” if it could be convinced that the future is bleak, or that their decisions made no difference in the world -- and equally disempowered if they believe the future is assured, regardless of what they do.

In this way, a calculation of consequences runs the risk of encouraging a sort of moral abdication in the face of looming catastrophe. A person could cling to hope, believing that society will find a way to escape relatively unscathed, no matter what they themselves do. *If the future will be okay, they reason, then I don't need to do anything.* Or a person could fall into despair, believing that society will vanish into the Venn diagram from Hell no matter what they themselves do. *If the future will be catastrophic regardless, they reason, then I don't need to do anything.* But this is a fallacy of false dichotomy. Between failing to act out of hope and failing to act out of despair is a broad ground, which we call “moral integrity.”

Can we see a new Venn diagram emerging

We explained: A consequentialist moral approach weighs seriously the price of millions of innocent human and other lives against the profit of perpetuating a consumer economy able to deliver the latest iPhone, plastic forks, and -- of all odd things -- golf. People make this calculation because they know no other way to think about their moral obligations. But there is another way. We called for “greatly downplay[ing], the consequences of our actions ... suggesting



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instead that our obligation to the future is most properly satisfied when we act rightly and virtuously ... when our motivation stands stubbornly apart from ... [a calculation of] the consequences of our actions.”

If the many noble actions in the face of uncertain outcomes in a time of peril demonstrate nothing else, they show that people are called to personal integrity. People are called to act rightly because such action is right; people are called to live with grace, dignity, humility, honour, and care because that is the right way to live. What is sought is a matching between actions and moral affirmations: To act lovingly toward the Earth because we love it; to act reverently toward the land, because we believe it is sacred; to live simply because we don't believe in taking more than our fair share. As a culture of integrity, people would act not because they believe their actions will prevent the ruin of the world, but because they are opposed to the ruin of the world, and actions that reflect this opposition are appropriate. Regardless of the projected outcome, they match their actions to what they know of the world and of what they believe is right.

Can we see a new Venn diagram emerging? In one circle is a metaphysic of connectedness, of life woven together, of human humility and earthliness, and so an ethic of reciprocity, a humble and wide-eyed sense of gratitude for the gift of life and this world freely given. In the second circle is the willingness to change, to understand that the world created by capitalist, extractionist, exceptionalist culture is not the only one, and probably not the best. Here, there is room for experimentation, imagination, flexibility, and a new truth-telling about what is

valuable and to whom. In the third circle is a sense of obligation to act with integrity, with a wholeness of self and values. And in the middle of this brave new confluence, there our possibility lies, suddenly different people and different societies than before. There policies can create change for the sake of the whole, not because it will save the world, but because the world is worth saving.

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