

Ethics, Naturally

Moral decisions must be based on biological reality

Book Review by John F. Rohe

Herschel Elliott has taught philosophy at the American University in Beirut, Lebanon, and at the University of Florida. He finds present standards of morality to be at odds with biological standards of survivability. His book ushers ethical principles for survival in a world of finitude.

Elliott's Preface concedes that "All ethical theories are subject to nature's veto." In the Foreword, Hon. Richard D. Lamm recognizes Elliott for challenging the "straitjacket of orthodoxy." As we continue to systematically dismantle natural systems, the urgency of Elliott's message is destined to resonate with greater clarity. Will nature forgivingly allow sufficient time for humanity to adopt Elliott's bio-centered ethics?

Albert Bartlett (TSC cover story Fall 2005) cautions that "The greatest shortcoming of the human race is our inability to understand the exponential function." Elliott understands it. He lives it. It sears a mark on his conscience. Living off the grid, he is governed by it. And he engages the reader into contemplating an enduring ethical system. The book is uniquely well-suited for discussion groups and book clubs.

Elliott correlates our unyielding growth ethic with the morality of building a more powerful automobile with no brakes. Population and commercial growth, in Elliott's system of ethics, are replaced with

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considerations of sustainability. Striking a responsible balance resides at the heart of his advocacy.

Conventional ethics are enshrined in the United Nations' "universal human rights." The rights mandate is self-perpetuating as long as the biological web is accommodating. The mandate, however, bears no relationship to an ecosystem's ability to offer support. Rights are unrelated to the cause of hardship. In a world of abundance, the U.N. ethics offer a rational framework. Amid scarcity, however, universal human rights become a recipe for desperation and extinction. The ethic turns on itself. It devours its subjects. Elliott's ethical analysis exposes human vulnerability.

As scarcities expand, universal human rights assure universal human collapse. Unqualified aid to overpopulated regions, for example, subsidizes overpopulation, the very cause of hardship. Unqualified aid and a growth ethic divorces responsibility for overpopulation from responsibility for remedial measures. In time, the ethic inflicts dispassionate cruelty. It conflicts with biological standards of decency. Nevertheless, it comports with the U.N.'s ethical mandate.

Every species tests the carrying capacity of its niche in the ecosystem. To breach the carrying capacity is to enroll in a hazardous Darwinian experiment. Striking a responsible biological balance might not be humanity's preferred choice, but it is an ungovernable reality. Natural systems will be the final arbiter. Rules in this domain are unappealable. Elliott proffers an ethical system based less on human hopes and more on biological realities.

Biological imperatives clash with Western notions of how things ought to be. Elliott reminds us

Ethics for a Finite World: An Essay Concerning a Sustainable Future

by Herschel Elliott
Golden, CO: Speaker's Corner Books
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of Vice President Cheney's mantra: "Our lifestyle is not negotiable." Perhaps Cheney has never negotiated with vanishing fossil fuel reserves. Manmade laws are not necessarily reconcilable with the laws of nature. Yogi Berra concludes: "Nature bats last."

Our growth ethic has been assuaged by the fortuitous discovery of abundant resources. Blinded by the dizzying treasure trove of resources and fossil fuels, we have been lulled into a human-centered ethical system. The endowment, however, remains finite. As limits are approached, the momentum of unchecked growth (in human numbers or consumption) is destined to be arrested.

Elliott's personal lifestyle validates the clarity of

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his convictions, yet he readily acknowledges the controversial nature of these ethical principles. His private sphere lends credence to prospects for a satisfying life and a secure legacy amid a serviceable conservation ethic.

The book develops a logically coherent framework to support bio-centered ethics. It concedes the impossibility of positively proving that strict conservation would assure longevity. The author-philosopher frames the logical and "moral absurdity" of supporting life within a pauperized ecosystem. The logician spares no precision in framing the issue. "Moral absurdity" becomes the starting point in Elliott's analysis.

Over the course of biological time, species have either maintained a healthy balance with their surroundings or they have been rendered extinct. Only

one known life form presupposes that its species-flattering ethics can trump nature's hand.

Elliott's ethics address three basic objectives: 1) to secure the world's ecosystem, 2) to diminish human demands on the environment, and 3) to expand the social, aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual values making life worth living.

Ethics, for Elliott, are variable and fact-intensive. Clearing a farm on the outskirts of a small town 200 years ago would have comported with ethical principles. On the other hand, today it would defy ethics to expand the clear cut if destabilized soils threaten mudslides, floods, and home dislocations. Scarcity limits moral options.

Elliott is a proponent of borders. Allowing each nation to run separate experiments on sustainability improves the overall odds of success.

Conventional morality finds expression in our legal system. Firearm ballistics can lead the gunman to justice. Punishment is exacted and recidivism yields. The wrongdoer, however, escapes if the fingerprints are obscured. Fact-finding can be blurred when sniffing the trail of an environmental wrongdoer. With hundreds of airborne carcinogens, it is difficult to pinpoint the cause of one person's malignancy. Which specific carcinogen is the smoking gun? Amid uncertainty, the environmental wrongdoer eludes justice. Ethical systems are enfeebled when the trail of causation is blurred.

History and progress brush against the limits of fossil fuel, fresh air, pure water, ozone, open space, oceanic fisheries, and natural resources. The experience promises to test the standards of morality developed in a world of abundant resources. All living things depend on the world's finite biosystem. Elliott finds Western ethics recklessly clash with empirical evidence on nature's balancing act.

The image of unlimited resources and vast horizons has nurtured the "manifest destiny" of our growth ethic. The image, however, turns out to have been an illusion. Humanity finds itself perilously embedded in a resilient, albeit frayed and fragile, ecosystem. A finite planet will not accommodate perpetual growth. "Growth, for the sake of growth," according to the late Edward Abbey, "is the ideology of a cancer cell." To honor conventional ethical norms is to inflict further environmental ruin. Prevalent

ethical systems offer self-defeating prospects. How ethical is that? ■