

# Towards an Ethics of Permanence

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Human beings have always been fascinated by nature; sometimes awed by its beauty, sometimes frightened by its fury as experienced in earthquakes, hurricanes, flooding, and drought. When it comes to our experience of human nature, we are sometimes thrilled and at other times disgusted by our own doings, confused and, rarely, contrite over what we have done or not done. We may at times try to understand and come to terms with all these perceptions, but mostly tend to avoid rigorous self-examination. As a result, nature, including human nature, has been severely damaged by the violence of our activities. Present signs suggest that a global disaster of unimaginable dimensions is imminent. The feeble attempts so far made to avert it, have had little effect. Denial, procrastination, blaming and seeking to punish others, are all in full play. We hastily introduce piecemeal reforms and fine-tune our thinking and acting only to find that they complicate the problems they were designed to solve. We are still largely groping in the dark. Perhaps the basic reason for this state of affairs is a faulty perception of our place in the natural order of things. Perhaps a fundamental transformation of our perceptions of ourselves and our world is needed. xxx Before going any further, it is necessary first to define the terms 'ethics' and 'permanence' that appear in the title of this essay. In a narrow sense, ethics is a code of conduct governing the relations among individual human beings, and among groups of them. In a wider sense, it is a code of conduct governing relations between individual and groups of human beings and all the other various entities of the world in which we find ourselves. Rationalist philosophers have attempted to define such a code exclusively in the language of discursive thought and discourse. However, these codes have proven ineffective in practice. The term 'permanence' implies continuity and stability, a situation in which things happen as they should. This suggests an active presence operating 'behind the scenes' as it were; of an ordering, controlling power. Such ordering is not to be thought of as unchanging; for change occurs with time, virtually from moment to moment. But, underlying such change it is possible to visualise a persistent, core pattern of unchanging relationships among things and events. Surface appearances of things and events in the world of everyday are a reflection of this pattern. It is revealed not by empirical observation, but only by insight. An insight, as the word implies, is a glimpse of what lies below the surface of appearances. Insights come as intuitions, or visions. They are vivid and insistent, demanding our attention. They are mostly clothed in the picture language of myth and symbol. In contemporary global culture, we do not see, or try to connect with, this core pattern of relationships because our lives are shaped and controlled by the assumption that we can act freely, that is, independently of, the greater nature in which we are embedded. We further believe that we are essentially individuals and participate in human communities only to the extent that it is personally convenient for us to do so. xxx People in many diverse contexts during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began to question this assumption that human beings are independent of nature. This questioning led to the tentative formulation of a contra-assumption: namely that we are deeply and fundamentally a part of nature. We may cite two examples of this. While the mainstream reaction to the signs of impending global crises is of disbelief, denial and fear of change, another reaction is an acceptance of the reality before us and a determination to undertake ameliorative actions, however small and personally inconvenient. More and more people are quietly devising novel practices which clearly demonstrate that gentler ways of organising our affairs are possible. These practices are gradually spreading in ever-widening circles. A few thinkers during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also questioned the mainstream assumption of the independence of human beings from nature. They came up with the same answer as the maverick ground-level practitioners just mentioned: human beings are an integral part of nature. And they went even further to suggest that nature as a whole is a living being. That the earth as a whole is a living entity and so are each and every one of its parts, whether it is a grain of sand, an ocean, a tree, a worm, a human being, a planet or a galaxy. While much remains to be done to articulate this assumption and come to a consensus among themselves on its implications, there is steady progress. We may view these developments as a response of these individuals and groups to their insights into the core pattern of relationships underlying the manifest world. xxx The pattern of relationships among all things is also a unitary, all-embracing causal agency. It determines to the most minute detail the way everything happens just as it does happen, and not otherwise. This is the active aspect of the core pattern of relationships. The moment-to-moment changes in the configurations of relationships in the outer world are to a great extent repetitive. Thus each succeeding configuration is more-or-less like the preceding one, thus creating the impression, when viewed as a series over time, of more-or-less continuous entities. Nevertheless, unexpected entities and events do sometimes appear, but they do not do so by chance. If we could take in the whole of the pattern at a glance, so to speak, we would understand how and why any particular unexpected entity or event appears. We are part of the whole, but no part of a whole can fully know the whole of which it is a part. All entities, as living beings, at whatever level they appear, are mortal. That is, they are born, they grow, mature, and eventually 'die'. This is true for a grain of sand as well as for a tree or a human being or a planet or the whole of creation. Each being is born in the now, and 'dies' a moment later with the expiry of that experience. The time-scale for this process is that of infinite duration; within this duration each type of entity operates on a time scale particular to itself. A human lifetime is actually the duration of a single experience; no more than the blink of a (human) eye. The implications of this notion that our human lives are no longer than the duration of a single experience are important. One of the most debilitating human tendencies is to live in memories of the past and in hopes for the future rather than in the present moment. Our memories of the past are gone forever. The pleasures and the security of the known past will never recur. We picture to ourselves future events that never come to pass. Better therefore to live entirely in the present, accept what comes and then move on, entertaining no thoughts of what the future will bring. In

fact, if we do not do so, our lives become meaningless. Whence comes this flow of sequential lives? We can never come to know. Many assumptions have been made, none of them satisfactory, and many are actually harmful. But we need not concern ourselves with this question, in order to create and put into operation an authentic ethics of permanence. We human beings tend to ask ourselves: when did this flow begin, when will it end, from where does it come and where does it go? We have more important things to do – if we could but realise it – than trying to answer these questions. Answers to them are not necessary to the task of creating an ethics of permanence. They are avoidable distractions. xxx Once we cognise the pattern of relationships underlying manifest existence and bring the knowledge of it and its working into the sphere of everyday life, our work is not finished. We must thereafter be circumspect and tentative in all our efforts to live by this knowledge. As is all too obvious, human beings are frail creatures, prone to confusion, selfishness, insecurity, greed, and the hoarding of life's everyday essentials, all of which obscure our vision and weaken our resolve. If we are earnest in our endeavour, we must request a periodic audit of our actions by the only one who can do it impartially –the universal living being. A meticulous deciphering of the responses received is bound to point out which of our actions fail to conform to the core pattern of relationships. These answers are in the language of intuition and vision, or of failures on the ground. We can then fine-tune our actions in the future. Or, if necessary, we can radically modify them, or even desist from them altogether if it seems necessary. xxx As we are today, we should consider ourselves to be ill; in dire need of healing. Our illness has been brought about by our many failures to act in accordance with the ethical imperatives of the core pattern of relationships underlying manifest phenomena. These failures are due to ignorance or inadvertence. Healing can occur if we endeavour to be mindful of the imperatives of the active causal agency that shapes and governs all beings and their activities, and act in accordance with it. This applies to our personal emotional and physical health, as well as to that of our families, our communities, our nations and the larger global community of which all these are parts. The cumulative effect of all our individual illnesses is an ailing planet. Healing is therefore a process of restoring the lost harmony of functioning which the universal being ever strives to maintain. We have interfered with this functioning and must therefore stop doing so, by asking for and accepting advice from the universal living being and mending our ways accordingly. Healing will then be spontaneous. To generalise from this, we must recognise that we human beings are not in any sense apart from nature, not observers of nature but participants or actors in its cosmic drama. Our roles are already written out before we step onto the stage of life, and we have only to act them out as best we can. If we falter, our prompter is at hand. There is no feeling of dull servitude, but only of joyful service, service done out of love. We come to realise that establishing this relationship is the ultimate purpose of our lives. xxx The permanence we seek is that of the establishment of an enduring abidance in an awareness of the core pattern of relationships as manifest in our lives, in those of other beings, and in the whole of manifest existence. Our lives will then reflect this pattern in our every act. The very notion of the need for a code of ethics imposed from without vanishes.

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