Narrating the Environmental Apocalypse: How Imagining the End Facilitates Moral Reasoning Among Environmental Activists

Robin Globus Veldman

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HOW IMAGINING THE END FACILITATES MORAL REASONING AMONG ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS

ROBIN GLOBUS VELDMAN

Often assumed to induce fatalism, empirical evidence shows that environmental apocalypticism is frequently associated with activism. I suggest this is the case because the notion of imminent catastrophe reveals a moral to the environmental story, and in so doing furnishes a point of view from which people can determine what constitutes environmentally ethical behavior. Insofar as it guides behavior, this apocalyptic moral reasoning can be usefully understood as a folk version of consequentialism. Further research on how people put environmental ethics into practice would complement the significant advances environmental ethicists have made in the areas of normative and meta-ethics over the past several decades.

As a number of observers have noted, the apocalypse is a recurrent theme in environmental discourse (Buell 2003; Barkun 1983; Killingsworth and Palmer 1996). Yet while no one debates that it successfully draws attention to environmental issues, both environmentalists and their opponents have criticized its use. Within the movement, many argue that

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Direct all correspondence to: Journals Manager, Indiana University Press, 601 N. Morton St., Bloomington, IN 47404 USA iuporder@indiana.edu

apocalypticism hinders activism, whether by encouraging fatalism or skepticism, risking self-fulfilling prophecies or by alienating moderates. For example, in their widely read report *The Death of Environmentalism*, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus contended that the movement needed a more positive vision, moving away from "apocalyptic global warming scenarios that tend to create feelings of helplessness and isolation among would-be supporters" (2004, 30; see also Feinberg and Willer 2011; Lewis 1999; and Meadows 1999). For critics external to the movement, environmentalists' apocalyptic-sounding pronouncements help prove that environmentalism is a religious rather than science-based movement, and therefore that its claims should not be taken seriously. According to the environmental skeptic Julian Simon, for example, environmentalists are motivated by "religious excitement" rather than a desire for scientific rigor, and therefore "simply shut their eyes to long-run trend evidence, all of which contradicts their prophecies.... [Environmental] prophets refuse to engage in true scientific discussion of the validity of their forecasts" (1995, 20–21). Since prophets have been predicting the end of the world since time immemorial, the logic goes, reasonable people need not take the latest apocalyptic predictions seriously. In the public sphere, such logic has been mobilized to counter environmentalists' arguments from the movement's early days of concern over pesticides and overpopulation to more recent concern over climate change (see Buell 2003; Bendle 2009; Crichton 2003; Dunn 2007; and *Resisting the Green Dragon* 2010).

While it may be true that environmentally apocalyptic rhetoric turns some people away from the movement, or that it superficially resembles apocalypticism based on Biblical prophecies, this is not all it does. In fact, there is ample evidence that environmentally apocalyptic views are often associated with activism. Yet while it is not surprising that those who believe the environmental situation is dire tend to want to do something about it, this "positive" (in an environmental sense) function has barely been recognized or explored as dependent on or deriving from an apocalyptic worldview. Instead, apart from a few important exceptions (e.g. Barkun 1983; Killingsworth and Palmer 1996; Taylor 1991 and 1994; Thompson 2009), discussions about apocalypticism in the environmental movement have been dominated largely by critics of it. What these critics have missed is that a fair amount of environmental activism occurs not

despite apocalypticism but *because* of it. In this paper I argue that this may be so because the notion of imminent apocalypse provides a moral to the environmental story—that humans must fundamentally alter their relationship with the natural world—and in so doing furnishes a point of view from which people can determine what constitutes environmentally ethical behavior. I further suggest that the apocalyptic narrative functions as a folk version of consequentialism.

By examining environmental apocalypticism from this perspective, I aim to recast its persistence not as cause for concern, but as cause for more judicious reflection upon, and perhaps even appreciation of, apocalypticism's function within the environmental community. Through this case study I also hope to encourage further work in descriptive environmental ethics. This empirical work would complement the significant advances environmental ethicists have made in the areas of normative and metaethics over the past several decades.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL APOCALYPSE

The term apocalypse literally means to uncover or disclose, and originally referred to divine revelations of any nature. Over time, it has come to mean revelations or prophecies specifically of end-times, the end of history, or divine overhaul of the world order (Stewart and Harding 1999, 286). Although the word is genealogically linked to the Christian tradition, in the twentieth century scholars began to apply it more broadly to a number of other movements both religious and secular. The environmental movement has been an obvious target for this extension beyond the religious sphere, for, as Michael Barkun noted, it shares with the Christian millennial tradition "the belief that the accepted texture of reality is about to undergo a staggering transformation, in which long-established institutions and ways of life will be destroyed" (1983, 258). Barkun argued that the two types were significantly different, however, in that the new secular apocalypticism eschewed prophecy as means of divining the future, instead relying on "a naturalistic world view, indebted to science and to social criticism rather than to theology" (ibid.). He was certainly correct to highlight the secular origins of the new environmental apocalypticism, for this helps distinguish it from its Christian counterparts. Yet it is also important to note that the use of science has not precluded religiosity entirely, particularly among radical environmentalists, New Age practi-

tioners, Neopagans, and Wiccans. While drawing heavily on science, and usually affirming human agency, environmental apocalypticism is thus best conceived not as a purely secular phenomenon, but as a syncretic tradition that combines both religious and secular elements to varying degrees.[1]

As with other forms of apocalypticism in the history of religion, environmental apocalypticism is characterized by certain shared beliefs about the past, present and future. Given that it is dispersed throughout the environmental community, the details of this worldview vary, but a basic storyline can easily be distilled from movement literature. Others have provided in-depth accounts of this narrative elsewhere, so I will only give its general form here.[2]

The narrative, which recounts humanity's fall from ecological grace, can be divided into three acts. The first two are concerned with history, while the last act concerns the future. In Act I, humans are depicted as living in idyllic harmony with nature, and in many accounts, viewing it as alive and sacred. This time is often located prior to the invention of agriculture or domestication (i.e. Oelschlaeger 1991; Quinn 1995; Shepard 1998), though others argue that it occurred prior to the invention of writing or other forms of symbolic communication (i.e. Abram 1996; Zerzan [1988] 1999). Act II tells the story of how humans began to turn against the natural world. Through ignorance, greed, hubris, the belief that humans are fundamentally separate from (or superior to) "nature," the desire to subjugate the "feminine" natural world, or in general to attain mastery over it, humans began to mould nature according to their own purposes without regard for other creatures (i.e. Merchant 1980; Evernden 1992). Intoxicated with power, they sought to subdue and dominate the earth, penetrating her secret depths with mines and ploughs, blighting her surface with dams and cities, and even, in the twentieth century, tinkering with her very essence through genetic engineering. As Rachel Carson wrote, those under the sway of this arrogant ideology, "supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man" ([1962] 2002, 297). Act III opens in the twentieth century, as humanity begins to reap the misfortune it has sewn in the forms of pollution, loss of biodiversity, overpopulation, deforestation, climate change and other environmental ills. Taken together, these changes are depicted as precipitating an ecological crisis of apocalyptic proportions, the "end the world as we know it." Environ-

mental writers sometimes imply that catastrophe is imminent via vivid descriptions of decline. At other times, they refer to it more directly, as when Anita Gordon and David Suzuki urged readers of their book *It's A Matter of Survival* to realize that "we have fewer than 10 years to turn things around or 'civilization as we know it will cease to exist.' The simple truth is that we are the last generation on Earth that can save the planet" (1991, 3). Act III typically closes with one of two endings. In the fatalistic mode, there is nothing humans can do to avert catastrophe, and the most realistic course of action is to start preparing now for a post-apocalyptic world. According to James Lovelock, for example, "The great party of the twentieth century is coming to an end, and unless we now start preparing our survival kit we will soon be just another species eking out an existence in the few remaining habitable regions" (2006, xiv). Alternatively, in what could be called the avertive mode (see Wojcik 2011), the story concludes by warning that humans can prevent catastrophe, but only if they act soon, and decisively. While the apocalypse looms in both versions of the drama, the lesson it is intended to impart differs in the two versions. In this paper I focus primarily on the avertive version, although in practice people often switch between the two (Lovelock's *The Revenge of Gaia* is a good example of this).

While the apocalyptic narrative is not the only one to be found within environmental discourse, it is one that has recurred frequently since the movement's inception. Moreover, as we shall see, it has appeared not only on paper, but in people's hearts and minds as well.

ENVIRONMENTAL APOCALYPTICISM AND ACTIVISM

As we saw in the introduction, critics often argue that apocalyptic rhetoric induces feelings of hopelessness or fatalism. While it certainly does for some people, in this section I will present evidence that apocalypticism also often goes hand in hand with activism.

Some of the strongest evidence of a connection between environmental apocalypticism and activism comes from a national survey that examined whether Americans perceived climate change to be dangerous. As part of his analysis, Anthony Leiserowitz identified several "interpretive communities," which had consistent demographic characteristics but varied in their levels of risk perception. The group who perceived the risk to be the greatest, which he labeled "alarmists," described climate change

using apocalyptic language, such as "Bad…bad…bad…like after nuclear war…no vegetation," "Heat waves, it's gonna kill the world," and "Death of the planet" (2005, 1440). Given such language, this would seem to be a reasonable way to operationalize environmental apocalypticism. If such apocalypticism encouraged fatalism, we would expect alarmists to be less likely to have engaged in environmental behavior compared to groups with moderate or low levels of concern. To the contrary, however, Leiserowitz found that alarmists "were significantly more likely to have taken personal action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions" (ibid.) than respondents who perceived climate change to pose less of a threat. Interestingly, while one might expect such radical views to appeal only to a tiny minority, Leiserowitz found that a respectable eleven percent of Americans fell into this group (ibid).

Further supporting Leiserowitz's findings, in a separate national survey conducted in 2008, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, and Leiserowitz found that a group they labeled "the Alarmed" (again, due to their high levels of concern about climate change) "*are the segment most engaged* in the issue of global warming. They are very convinced it is happening, human-caused, and a serious and urgent threat. The Alarmed are *already making changes in their own lives* and support an aggressive national response" (2009, 3, emphasis added). This group was far more likely than people with lower levels of concern over climate change to have engaged in consumer activism (by rewarding companies that support action to reduce global warming with their business, for example) or to have contacted elected officials to express their concern. Additionally, the authors found that "[w]hen asked which reason for action was most important to them personally, the Alarmed were most likely to select preventing the destruction of most life on the planet (31%)" (2009, 31)—a finding suggesting that for many in this group it is specifically the desire to avert catastrophe, rather than some other motivation, that encourages pro-environmental behavior. Taken together, these and other studies (cf. Semenza et al. 2008 and DerKarabetia, Stephenson, and Poggi 1996) provide important evidence that many of those who think environmental problems pose a severe threat practice some form of activism, rather than giving way to fatalistic resignation.

National surveys give a good overview of the association between apocalypticism and activism among the general public, but they do not

provide sufficient ethnographic detail. To complement this broader picture I now turn to case studies, which provide greater insight into how adherents themselves understand what motivates their environmental behavior.

When seeking a subset of environmentalists with apocalyptic beliefs, the radical wing is an obvious place to look. For example, many Earth First!ers believe that the collapse of industrial society is inevitable (Taylor 1994). At the same time, the majority are actively committed to preventing ecological disaster. As Earth First! co-founder Howie Wolke acknowledged, the two are directly connected: "As ecological calamity unravels the living fabric of the Earth, environmental radicalism has become both common and necessary" (1989, 29).[3] This logic underlies efforts to preserve wilderness areas, which many radical environmentalists believe will serve as reservoirs of genetic diversity, helping to restore the planet after industrial society collapses (Taylor 1994). In addition to encouraging activism to preserve wilderness, apocalyptic beliefs also motivate practices such as "monkeywrenching," or ecological sabotage, civil disobedience, and the more conventional "paper monkeywrenching" (lobbying, engaging in public information campaigns to shift legislative priorities, or using lawsuits when these tactics fail). Ultimately, while there are disagreements over what strategies will best achieve their desired goals, for most radical environmentalists, apocalypticism and activism are bound closely together.

The connection between belief in impending disaster and environmental activism holds true for Wiccans as well. During fieldwork in the southeastern United States, for example, Shawn Arthur reported meeting "dozens of Wiccans who professed their apocalyptic millenarian beliefs to anyone who expressed interest, yet many others only quietly agreed with them without any further elaboration" (2008, 201). For this group, the coming disaster was understood as divine retribution, the result of an angry Earth Goddess preparing to punish humans for squandering her ecological gifts (Arthur 2008, 203). In light of Gaia's impending revenge, Arthur found that Wiccans advocated both spiritual and material forms of activism. For example, practices such as Goddess worship, the use of herbal remedies for healing, and awareness of the body and its energies were considered important for initiating a more harmonious relationship with the earth (Arthur 2008, 207). As for material activism, Arthur notes

that the notion of environmental apocalypse played a key role in encouraging pro-environmental behavior:

> images of immanent [*sic*] ecological crisis and apocalyptic change often were utilized as motivating factors for developing an environmentally and ecologically conscious worldview; for stressing the importance of working for the Earth through a variety of practices, including environmental activism, garbage collecting, recycling, composting, and religious rituals; for learning sustainable living skills; and for developing a special relationship with the world as a divine entity. (2008, 212)

What these studies and my own experiences in the environmentalist milieu[4] suggest is that people who make a serious commitment to engaging in environmentally friendly behavior, people who move beyond making superficial changes to making substantial and permanent ones, are quite likely to subscribe to some form of the apocalyptic narrative.

All this is not to say that apocalypticism directly or inevitably causes activism, or that believing catastrophe is imminent is the only reason people become activists. However, it *is* to say that activism and apocalypticism are associated for some people, and that this association is not arbitrary, for there is something uniquely powerful and compelling about the apocalyptic narrative. Plenty of people will hear it and ignore it, or find it implausible, or simply decide that if the situation really is so dire there is nothing they can do to prevent it from continuing to deteriorate. Yet to focus only on the ability of apocalyptic rhetoric to induce apathy, indifference or reactance is to ignore the evidence that it also fuels quite the opposite—grave concern, activism, and sometimes even outrage. It is also to ignore the movement's history. From *Silent Spring* (Carson [1962] 2002) to *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al 1972) to *The End of Nature* (McKibben 1989), apocalyptic arguments have held a prominent place within environmental literature, topping best-seller lists and spreading the message far and wide that protecting the environment should be a societal priority. Thus, while it is not a style of argument that will be effective in convincing everyone to commit to the environmental cause (see Feinberg and Willer 2011), there does appear to be a close relationship between apocalyptic belief and activism among a certain minority. The next section explores the implications of that relationship further.

THE APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE AS A FRAMEWORK FOR MORAL DELIBERATION

In discussing how apocalypticism functions within the environmental community, it will be helpful to analyze it as a type of narrative. I do so because the domain of narrative includes both the stories that people read and write, as well as those they tell and live by. By using narratives as data, scholars can analyze experiential and textual sources simultaneously (Polkinghorne 1988; Riessman 2000).

To analyze environmental apocalypticism as a type of narrative is not to suggest that apocalyptics' claims about the future are fictional. Rather, it is to highlight that the facts to which environmentalists appeal have been organized with particular goals in mind, goals which have necessarily shaped the selection and presentation of those facts. Compelling environmental writers do not simply list every known fact pertaining to the natural world, but instead select certain findings and place them within a larger interpretive framework. Alone, each fact has little meaning, but when woven into a larger narrative, a message emerges. This process of narrativization is essential if a message is to be persuasive (Killingsworth and Palmer 2000, 197), and has occurred not only in the rapidly expanding genre of environmental nonfiction, but in much scientific writing about the environment as well (Harré, Brockmeier, and Mühlhäusler 1999, 69).

What defines narratives as such is their beginning-middle-end structure, their ability to "describe an action that begins, continues over a well-defined period of time, and finally draws to a definite close" (Cronon 1992, 1367). Here I will focus on the last of these elements, the ending, because anything we can learn about how endings function within narratives in general will be applicable to the apocalypse, the most final ending of all.

An ending is essential in order for a story to be complete, but there is more to it than this. Endings are also key because they establish a story's moral, the lesson it is supposed to impart upon the reader. In other words, to know the moral of the story, auditors must know the consequences of the actions depicted therein, so there can be no moral without an ending. To take a simple example, when we hear the story of the shepherd boy who falsely claims that a wolf is attacking his flock of sheep in order to entertain himself at his community's expense, what makes the lesson clear is that when a wolf does attack his flock, the disenchanted town members refuse to come to his aid. By clearly illustrating how telling lies can have

unpleasant consequences for the perpetrator, the ending reveals the moral that lying is wrong. As Cronon explains, it is "[t]he difference between beginning and end [that] gives us our chance to extract a moral from the rhetorical landscape" (1992, 1370).

Endings play a similar role in environmental stories. In Al Gore's book *Earth in the Balance* (1992), for example, he devotes over a third of the book's pages to presenting scientific evidence that disaster is imminent.[5] As he sums it up, "Modern industrial civilization…is colliding violently with our planet's ecological system. The ferocity of its assault on the earth is breathtaking, and the horrific consequences are occurring so quickly as to defy our capacity to recognize them" (1992, 269). He builds this argument so carefully precisely because if the ending does not seem credible, the moral he wants readers to draw from the story will not be compelling. If his readers are not convinced that the ending to this story of ecological misbehavior will be a debacle of colossal proportions, they will not become convinced that they need to dramatically alter their ecological behavior. Thus the vision of future catastrophe that Gore presents provides a crucial vantage point from which the present environmental situation can be understood as the result of a grand moral failure, and Gore's readers are made aware of their obligations in light of it. Gore himself appreciates the importance of this recognition, arguing that "whether we realize it or not, we are now engaged in an epic battle to right the balance of our earth, and the tide of this battle will turn *only when the majority of people in the world become sufficiently aroused by a shared sense of urgent danger* to join an all-out effort" (1992, 269, emphasis added). Here, as in so many other stories, the ending must be in place for the moral to become clear.

To say that endings are essential in order for stories to have morals is already to hint that stories alter behavior, that they can encourage action in the real world even as they invoke an imaginary one. This much is clear from *Earth in the Balance* (1992): Gore does not just want people to grasp a moral, to perceive some ethic in the abstract—he wants them change their behavior in the here and now. In constructing a narrative with this goal in mind, he is banking on the ability of powerful stories to motivate social change, to be, as Cronon puts it, "our chief moral compass in the world" (1992, 1375).

Mark Johnson's insightful synthesis of cognitive science and philosophy helps explain further how this process of moral guidance occurs. For

Johnson, narrative is fundamental to our experience of reality, "the most comprehensive means we have for constructing temporal syntheses that bind together and unify our past, present, and future into more or less meaningful patterns" (1993, 174). Narratives are also critical to our ability to reason morally, an activity which Johnson asserts is fundamentally imaginative. In this view, we use stories to imagine ourselves in different scenarios, exploring and evaluating the consequences of different possible actions in order to determine the right one. Moral deliberation is thus

> …an imaginative exploration of the possibilities for constructive action within a present situation. We have a problem to solve here and now (e.g., 'What am I to do?'…. 'How should I treat others?'), and we must try out various possible continuations of our narrative in search of the one that seems best to resolve the indeterminacy of our present situation. (1993, 180)

Put another way, what cognitive science has revealed is that from an empirical perspective the process of moral deliberation entails constructing narratives rooted in our unique history and circumstances, rather than applying universal principles (such as Kant's categorical imperative) to particular cases. That we use narratives to reason morally is not a result of conscious choice but of how human cognition works. That is, insofar as we experience ourselves as temporal beings, a narrative framework is necessary to organize, explain, and ultimately justify the many individual decisions that over time become a life. Formal principles may be useful in unambiguous textbook cases, but in real life "we can almost never decide (reflectively) how to act without considering the ways in which we can continue our narrative construction of our situation" (Johnson 1993, 160). Empirically speaking, "*our moral reasoning is situated within our narrative understanding*" (Johnson 1993, 180, italics in original).

The observation that people use narratives to reason morally may help explain the association between environmental apocalypticism and activism. The function of the apocalyptic narrative may be that it helps adherents determine how to act by providing a storyline from which they can imaginatively sample, enabling them to assess the consequences of their actions. In order to answer the question, "Should I drive or walk to the store?" for example, they can reason, "If I walk, that will reduce my carbon footprint, which will help keep the ice caps from melting, saving humans and other species." It is their access to this narrative of impend-

ing disaster that makes such reasoning possible, for it provides a simple framework within which people can consider and eventually arrive at some conclusion about their moral obligations.[6] More broadly, it can guide entire lives by providing a narrative frame of reference that imbues the individual's experiences with meaning. For example, it is the context of looming anthropogenic apocalypse which suggests that dedicating one's life to achieving a healthier relationship with the natural world is a worthwhile endeavor. Absent the apocalypse, choices such as limiting one's travel to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, becoming vegetarian, working in the environmental sector (often for less compensation), or growing one's own food could seem to be meaningless sacrifices. Within this context, on the other hand, such choices become essential features of the quest to live a moral life.

The apocalyptic narrative is but one of many ways to tell the environmental story, yet it is one that seems particularly well-suited to encouraging pro-environmental behavior. First, the apocalyptic ending discloses certain everyday decisions as *moral* decisions. Without the narrative context of impending disaster, decisions such as whether to drive or walk to the store would be merely matters of convenience or preference. In the context of potentially disastrous consequences for valued places, people, and organisms, by contrast, such decisions become matters of right and wrong. Second, putting information about the environment into narrative form enables apocalyptics to link complex global environmental processes to their own lives, a perceptual technique Thomashow describes as "bringing the biosphere home" (2002). Developing this skill is essential because without that felt sense of connection to their own lived experience, people are much less likely to become convinced that it is incumbent upon them to act (2002, 2). Finally, the sheer magnitude of the impending disaster increases the feeling of responsibility to make good on one's moral intuitions. By locating individuals within a drama of ultimate concern, the narrative frames their choices as cosmically important, and this feeling of urgency then helps to convert moral deliberation into action.

With this conceptual overview in place, we can now examine more closely what the relationship between apocalypticism and moral reasoning looks like in practice.

APOCALYPTICISM AS FOLK CONSEQUENTIALISM

While a number of philosophers and ethicists have discussed the role of narrative in environmental ethics (e.g. Cheney 1989; Gare 1998; Liszka 2003; Peterson 2001), less is known about how such narrative ethics might function in practice. Such a project falls within the domain of descriptive ethics, or ethical inquiry that seeks to understand not what the results of moral reasoning *should* be, but what they *are*. Instead of looking for abstract, decontextualized or universal principles, a descriptive approach seeks to understand how specific individuals faced with concrete situations reason morally in everyday life. As Johnson writes, this approach is valuable "not because it gives laws or rules for acting (which it doesn't), but rather because knowing oneself and knowing how human beings work can help one understand situations, examine problems, and work out constructive solutions" (1993, 189). In other words, if one wants to solve moral conundrums, it helps to have the facts straight—including the facts about the practice of solving moral conundrums.

The connection between narratives and ethics has often been developed within the context of the virtue tradition (cf. MacIntyre [1981] 2007; Hauerwas 1981). Certainly there are aspects of environmental culture that cohere with the idea of virtue (see Cafaro 2001). Yet when people invoke the narrative of environmental apocalypse, when they use it to evaluate their present day behaviors, I have not heard it expressed in the context of developing character toward a particular end, but of avoiding consequences. This suggests to me that in the case of environmental apocalypticism the reasoning process is better understood as a form of consequentialism, or more appropriately, folk consequentialism, to indicate that I am referring to what people do to reason morally in everyday life. A few examples from my field research among environmentalists who subscribe to an apocalyptic narrative should help to illustrate this point.

In the fall of 2007 I joined a climate change-themed discussion group that had been convened by a local environmental non-profit organization based in Gainesville, Florida. I selected this group because following Leiserowitz (2005) and Maibach, Roser-Renouf, and Leiserowitz (2009), I reasoned that people who made the effort to participate in such an activity would more likely to consider climate change to be a potentially dire threat. At the conclusion of the six week series, I conducted semi-structured interviews with four of the ten regular participants in order

to further probe their perceptions of and feelings about the prospect of environmental disaster. While I cannot draw broad conclusions based on this small sample, I can say that among the people I spoke with there was a strong connection between a desire to heal or protect the Earth and a sense of impending catastrophe. With this focus on consequences as the primary criteria for moral decision making, their reasoning thus appears to fit within a consequentialist framework.

One way this folk consequentialism became evident was in the way people described their life trajectories being altered by the conviction that environmental disaster was imminent. One woman I interviewed, "Sarah," had been interested in environmental issues for much of her life, but reading Daniel Quinn's novel *Ishmael* (1995) had pushed her to dramatically alter her lifestyle so that it would be more consonant with environmental principles. In *Ishmael,* Quinn argues that the environmental crisis is the result of agricultural "Taker" cultures displacing hunting and gathering "Leaver" cultures worldwide. Taker cultures, which now dominate the planet, hold that the natural world exists only for human use, whereas Leaver cultures, who have been increasingly marginalized since the invention of agriculture, see humans as humble members of a larger community of living beings. Whereas Taker cultures therefore feel justified in destroying the planet's biodiversity for their own benefit, Leaver cultures tend to limit themselves out of respect for other creatures. Articulating a version of the narrative of environmental apocalypse, Quinn suggests that if Taker cultures do not realize their error in time, the human species may bring about its own extinction (1995, 238–40, 263).

Sarah used Quinn's terms to describe the threat she believed increasing human numbers posed, saying "Overpopulation drives depletion of resource…. So we're, in Dan Quinn's terms, Takers instead of Leavers. So all of that combines but the overpopulation really drives the destruction." Later, she explained the full extent to which the book had influenced her life choices:

> *Sarah*: [*Ishmael*] was such a ground-shaking book. I bought about ten copies and started handing it out…. I've since read all his books. And so, upon reading that, I decided I wanted to learn how to grow my own food…. and I just started 'Food Not Lawns' . . . I'm on a learning curve, and then you have to collect all the tools to process [the food you grow]."

Robin: So do you can and all that?

Sarah: Yeah. Not freezing because it takes too much energy. And that actually drove our decision to move away. We sought a place where we felt it was more sustainable to begin with and where the community was more of a community…. the Pacific Northwest was a place that we knew to be more sustainable and [so] we purchased a house in [Washington state].

As she explains, it was a comprehension of the deep roots of the unfolding ecological crisis and its potentially disastrous consequences that inspired her to make a series of substantial lifestyle changes. Subsequent decisions, such as how to store food (via low energy means), were made with the goal of reducing her own contribution to dangerous climate change as much as possible. That she made her decisions with an eye to preventing certain consequences appears to support the theory that she reasoned morally using a broadly consequentialist logic.

The connection between consequences and moral obligations came up during the group meetings as well. For example, as we went around the circle introducing ourselves the first night, a number of people mentioned unusual weather, as well as changes they had noted in the distribution of various plant and animal species. Rather than just presenting these facts alone, several people linked them to feelings of guilt and personal responsibility for the crisis. That individuals linked environmental consequences to a sense of moral obligation suggests that some form of consequentialism was at work. This connection between consequences and moral obligation also seemed to be at work at the group level. For example, during almost every gathering, participants discussed not only what *could* be done to prevent environmental disaster (given the time and resources available), but what *should* be done. In this sense the gatherings served as a forum for collective moral deliberation, in which various environmental futures were imagined and the group's moral obligations evaluated in light of them. This seems to further support the notion that those who have adopted the environmentally apocalyptic worldview use a consequentialist framework to engage in moral reasoning.

In observing that people appear to use a kind of folk consequentialism to determine what actions are ecologically moral, I do not intend to promote consequentialism as a basis for environmental ethics, or to imply that my informants made the most ethical or environmentally sensitive

choices given their means. Rather my point is to observe that, empirically speaking, those who use the apocalyptic narrative to guide their ethical decision making appear to use a form of consequentialism to guide at least some of these choices.[7] This seems especially plausible if people do use narratives to engage in moral reasoning, for narratives are typically time-oriented (Johnson 1993, 174), and therefore generally compatible with the action–consequences framework that also underpins consequentialism. The reasoning process involved in folk consequentialism may be semi-ad hoc, containing contradictions or leaving some conundrums unresolved, but it nevertheless does appear to provide people with a working framework for deciding what behavior is morally justifiable. Moreover, it is compelling enough to get people to act on their decisions. What it lacks in philosophical rigor, it makes up in applicability.

THE APOCALYPTIC COMMUNITY

A final function of the narrative of environmental apocalypse remains to be discussed—its social function. As Anna Peterson points out, narrative entails "a social view of self" (2001, 22), communal ways of interpreting and approaching perceived problems. In the environmental community as well, the narrative of apocalypse gives people the sense that they are one of many participants in a collective quest. "I'm not sure what I envisioned," wrote one environmentalist who had since moved away from an apocalyptic worldview. "[I]t was hard to see exact details of the social order across the general chaos that would come…. I just knew that whatever happened…. my future would be assured…. I belonged to a new tribe, and the tribe would care for me" (Zencey 1988, 55).[8] The importance of community was also clear in Sarah's desire for like-minded neighbors, and the discussion group's practice of collective moral reasoning. As in other apocalyptic cosmologies, the narrative of environmental apocalypse thus seems to "[establish] a group ethos through a vision of shared origin and destiny," while also "[offering] propositions both descriptive and normative, intended to depict and explain the universe as it is and to orient human beings toward right action" (O'Leary 1994, 25). This social function, which binds individuals together into a community of believers, is surely part of what accounts for its seeming power to translate values into practices.

This power should not be conceived just in terms of socialization, but

also in terms of tradition. That is, the narrative of environmental apocalypse is effective not only because many share it today but because many have shared it over time. It is what Alasdair MacIntyre might have referred to as a living tradition, an "historically extended, socially embodied argument" ([1981] 2007, 222) concerning what constitutes the good.[9]

Some might argue that environmental apocalypticism is not really old enough to constitute a moral tradition, since it began only in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. In fact however, the antecedents of this tradition can be traced much further back in history. As early as the sixteenth century, cultural critics warned that human domination of nature could lead to the decay and death of the natural world (Lewis 1992). Such critiques were generally overshadowed by the burgeoning optimism that accompanied the Age of Enlightenment and eventually the Industrial Revolution, but they never died out completely, resurfacing with the Romantic movement of the eighteenth century, and finally capturing a more mainstream audience beginning in the 1960s.[10] The narrative is no recent invention, then, but in fact represents generations of environmental interpretation and moral reflection. With both the weight of tradition and the power to bind people together, the narrative of environmental apocalypse is thus a potent source for motivating environmentally ethical behavior.

TOWARD DESCRIPTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Outside of human minds exist billions of interacting events and processes—atoms, humans, animals, plants, microbes, and so on—whose ultimate trajectory is uncertain, if not in many cases impossible to predict. I have suggested that the apocalyptic ending is one solution to the problem of how to convert this impersonal complexity into a meaningful story that draws and holds peoples' attention for long enough to influence their actions. It does so through a story that simply and succinctly tells listeners that there is a problem, that it may have disastrous consequences, and that certain kinds of actions therefore must taken in order to avoid them. And while it is always in this space between the tangible present and the imagined future that the opportunity for moral engagement with the world arises, I argue that it is especially when the connection between the two feels tenuous that such an opportunity comes to be experienced as an obligation.

Certainly the apocalyptic mode has its shadow side. Paranoia, self-righteousness, and feverish hope skirt the edge of disappointment, leading many both within and outside of the environmental movement to view it with suspicion. Indeed, many environmentalists would do well to heed Catherine Keller's call for a more self-critical discourse of "counter-apocalypse" (1996), rather than falling prey to the temptation to demonize the anti-environmental other. But this should not prevent scholars from attending to the important role apocalypticism plays within the movement. As much as some in the movement try to disclaim such discourse, it is clear that many adherents draw inspiration from it. So much so that they are moving to distant communities where they believe they will be able to live more ecologically sensitive lives; they are teaching their neighbors to grow their own food because transporting it from other parts of the country has too large of a carbon footprint; and they are "paper monkey-wrenching" in Washington, D.C. and in courtrooms around the country in order to ensure that the environment is legally protected to the greatest extent possible. They are putting environmental values into practice, and many are doing so because they seriously believe that if they do not, disaster will follow. Even if observers of the movement disagree with their conclusions about what constitutes ethical behavior or worthwhile activism, this demonstrated willingness to make substantial sacrifices seems to make the project of understanding their motivations worthwhile.

With the environmental and sustainability movements in full swing, further empirical research examining how people determine what is right and wrong behavior with regard to the environment could serve as an important complement to the work already completed in meta- and normative environmental ethics during the past several decades. Such work would be of vital interest to anyone concerned with the real world implications of ethical theories, potentially yielding insights about what constraints and limitations humans face as they attempt to draw moral meaning from the environmental situation. What further insights might be gleaned from the study of how ethics *are* practiced in tandem with the study of how ethics *should* be practiced? With the present study serving as an example, I would submit that exploring how people negotiate, reformulate, and resist making ethical choices relating to the environment in their everyday lives can yield valuable insights about the important question of how environmental values become environmentally valuable

practices. In the end, it is possible that such work will be valuable not only for scholars, but for the Earth.

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NOTES

1 For accounts that further explore the combination of the secular and the religious in environmental apocalypticism, see Giner and Tábara (1999), Globus and Taylor (2011) and Lewis (1992).
2 See Barkun (1983), Killingsworth and Palmer (1996), Lewis (1992), and Murphy (2003).
3 This quotation is drawn from primary materials made available in Bron Taylor's "Radical Environmentalism (Spring 2007)" course syllabus, available at www.religionandnature.com/bron/courses.htm [Accessed 15 March 2008].
4 I borrow this term from Taylor (2010).
5 This is a common tactic in environmental literature. Carson ([1962] 2002), Catton (1982), Odum and Odum (2001), and Ophuls (1977) are but a few examples.
6 Importantly, to say this is not to evaluate the ethical content of their decisions, but rather to suggest how their process of moral reasoning occurs. My approach is descriptive, not normative.
7 People may use other folk frameworks in situations where the moral problem structure is different (e.g. in cases involving animal rights, where there is the possibility of dealing directly with sentient beings who can feel pain).
8 Zencey's description of his former apocalyptic beliefs using the first person plural further demonstrates the communal quality of the narrative: "While *we* knew that in the short run resource scarcity and a declining standard of living would probably prompt our country into imperial aggression and domestic repression, *we* also knew that ultimately this course depended on both a rapacious use of resources and a companion faith in [technology]. The earth is finite and *we* knew that there had to be limits…. As *we* approached those limits the lesson would become obvious" (1988, 55, emphasis added).
9 In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre defined tradition as:

> "…an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition . . . and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted." (1988, 12).

The environment movement seems to cohere with this schema, since there have been fundamental agreements (e.g. the environment is in grave peril due to human actions), which have been subjected to both internal interpretive debates (e.g. Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004) and external critiques (e.g. Simon 1995).

10. See Lewis (1992), Merchant (1980 and 2003), and Oelschlaeger (1991) for extended versions of this history.

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