



Ethical ction Report

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Welcome to the Ethical Action Report 2.0

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Preview of Our Beleaguered Species: Beyond Tribalism, by Elizabeth (Liz) Crouch Zelman, Ethical Society of St. Louis

*Editor's note: In honor of Earth Day, in addition to two articles more directly about sustainability, this month's **Ethical Action Report** invites you to consider a broader approach to the naturalism inherent in Ethical Culture. A part of learning how to be in better relationship with our planet and with each other involves understanding the development of human culture from an anthropological perspective. When I heard about Liz Zelman's upcoming book about the development of ethics and tribalism, I wanted to share it with the rest of the Ethical Culture community. I thank her for offering us this preview of her work!*

In this book I explore how we two-legged creatures evolved and lived for the first several million years of our tenure on earth to become who we are today, and where we might be headed. No one knows the ending, but it seems clear that we are on the brink of large changes. My book's title -- *Our Beleaguered Species* -- suggests a rather pessimistic view of *Homo sapiens*, but this is countered by the subtitle, *Beyond Tribalism*, which hints at a path forward.

The first and longest phase of our evolution from arboreal apes into terrestrial bipeds began approximately six million years ago, with major worldwide climate changes! Replacement of dense tree coverage throughout Africa with mixed woodland-grassland terrain forced some of the multiple ape populations to attempt life on the ground. Subsequently, a split occurred with one branch increasingly using only two legs for navigating the ground, and the other branch, destined to split further into common chimpanzees and bonobos, maintaining more of an arboreal lifestyle. The incipient terrestrial populations, now using forelimbs in new ways, slowly and haltingly managed to fend off predators, discover new foods, and protect and nurture their young. Some populations made it; more did not.

Habitual upright posture modified our ancestors' pelvises, making childbirth more difficult by reducing the size of the pelvic opening. This eventually put a premium on increasing prematurity of infants, who then experienced more of their brain growth after birth. As brain size increased further, so did this conundrum.

This dangerous terrestrial lifestyle would have challenged our ancestors, defenseless against predators, without continual access to trees for safety. In this context, group living and cooperation would have been critical. Brainier, more innovative animals would have more easily negotiated cooperation in raising and protecting helpless offspring and finding and extracting new foods in changing environments. Significant human brain enlargement and re-organization took off only after these experiments with bipedalism had resulted in a more stable and faster biped. Childhoods lengthened as brains increased in size, matured later, and responded to developing social and technical skills. Language-based culture co-evolved with brains, transforming us into extremely social, verbal apes, *Homo sapiens*, that emerged only around 200,000 years ago. Given time, worldwide migrations, and then the beginning of food production and its many consequences, *Homo sapiens* came to dominate nature itself, as had no other species.

As social animals, *Homo sapiens* bond strongly with and tend to favor members of their own social groups, a helpful trait for small, scattered groups living on the ground. However, this bonding had a downside: It was balanced by much less positive feeling toward outsiders. This piece of our evolutionary legacy is a tendency toward "tribalism," a sense of group specialness or superiority. In becoming hyper-attached to our own ways of living and thinking, we easily slip into using this strong identity to denigrate other human groups.

I use "tribalism" generically for this *attitude and related behaviors*, not in reference to a particular type of society. This ancient tribal impulse evolved long ago; today in our world of highly interconnected groups, it no longer makes sense to continue as warring tribes. This mentality imposes extraordinary costs and dangers on all of us in our twenty-first century world. And, in de-emphasizing our common humanity, it encourages ignorance of problems that we share, holding us back from seeking common solutions.

Fortunately, evolution also endowed us with other impulses and attitudes. As Darwin envisioned years ago, we have the capacity to extend social "sentiments" to all people and even beyond, using our double evolutionary legacy of intelligence and empathy. Language-based culture gives our species its greatest strength -- adaptability, behavioral flexibility -- that enables us to move *beyond tribalism*. Our future as a species on a planet of shrinking resources depends on overcoming the ancient "tribalistic" perceptions and emotions that divide us.

How can we do this? *First*, we must become aware of our own biases. All of us have them, and many are "hidden" even to ourselves. Tribalism is group bias, viewing one's own group or "tribe" as special, chosen, saved, or accomplished; racism, religious sectarianism (religion run amok), and "American exceptionalism" are examples of its many forms. *Secondly*, we must come to understand and accept that diverse ways of thinking and behaving are our strengths as a species. Just as genetic variety provided the raw material for biological evolution, cultural and behavioral variety provides the raw material for innovating, for creating pro-social, humanitarian institutions and technologies, using our twin gifts of reasoning and empathy for others.

In this second decade of the twenty-first century, we are at an exciting and important turning point in understanding what it means to be human, and what our future might bring. Rapid advances in the science of human behavior and the ability to analyze data from ancient biological and cultural remains have brought us to this point. We might use our vast and diverse pool of creativity in these ways:

1. Recognizing impulsive responses as such, and substituting "slow thinking" reflective responses, and working to modify not only our thinking but even our emotions -- those movers of all creatures.
2. Encouraging intergroup, international activities such as friendships, marriages, trade, music-making, scientific projects, global initiatives, peacemaking, that pull people together across various boundaries. I view the merging of worldwide musical traditions, and widespread electronic communication as promising developments.
3. Encouraging recognition and appreciation of human motivations other than material gain, in devising economic and political institutions. Most of us feel good when we do good, and care about our reputations.
4. Reducing extreme inequalities of income and power and *disabling* their influence on public institutions such as education and government. This requires quality education accessible to all children, essential for any democracy to work. Both require changes in institutional priorities.

5. Redefining *outside threat* in terms of humanity as a whole. *Environmental degradation*, for example, threatens all humans and other living things; it is a natural focus, worthy of being “fought” in a victimless struggle.

Cross-cultural evidence suggests that violence and war covary with particular sociocultural institutions as well as organization of work and fair administration of justice. Violent responses to differences may be reduced with increased women’s participation and status. How we organize ourselves can nudge individuals toward more or less peaceable relationships within *and* between groups. We humans vary, but most of us *can* be generous and caring, and open to new ideas, in different degrees individually, and in different degrees as influenced by our culture’s priorities and other circumstances. Even if the capacity for tribal behavior and violence is part of our biological heritage, so are these alternative capacities. As we stretch our ethical muscles, they will strengthen and perhaps “we shall overcome.”

Finally, we *Homo sapiens* are capable of moving forward in our behavior and thinking -- by understanding (1) our human assets and vulnerabilities, (2) our dependence on the planet that nurtures us, (3) the need to build a long-term future. We can influence the workings of our own brains by how we act and even how we talk to ourselves. We can build institutions that foster cooperation. We can practice opposing or at least overriding our tribal tendencies. We can move beyond tribalism and toward sustainable globalism. Will we muster the strength to do so?

Our Beleaguered Species: Beyond Tribalism

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Environmental Ethics: Front and Center, Monica Weiss, New York Society for Ethical Culture

In Ethical Culture we place the highest value on “Deed Above Creed.” We are a community of people who seek to make the world a better place through ethical behavior, choices and actions. Many Ethical Culture members consider themselves activists. *Wikipedia* defines activism as consisting of any efforts to promote, impede or direct social, political, economic or environmental change or stasis. The term connotes a peaceful form of conflict.

Our active NYSEC members are doing everything to run the Society from being on the Board, to serving on several committees, and running events. They may or may not be “activists” but they are active and entitled to participate in a way that is meaningful and fulfilling. There are so many important issues and

During the past two years we have welcomed speakers, presented a Sunday platform, promoted letter writing campaigns, sponsored educational programs and films (*Frackonomics*; *Dear Governor Cuomo*), offered presentations on the *Climate Reality Project* and *The Myth of Shale Gas in NYS*, and funded and participated in a post-Sandy habitat clean up on Fire Island with our Leader, Curt Collier and teens from his youth program at *Groundwork* in Yonkers.

Currently, in addition to their regular open meetings, 350NYC has two working groups that meet once a month - one is the “divest group” and the other is a “sustainability group” of which I am a member. This group has created an incredible project that we are launching this month that will encourage New Yorkers to switch their electric supply company (ESCO) to one that offers energy completely produced by wind. This would provide investment in wind energy development based on the number of KW hours each household uses monthly. Ethical Culture committees, societies, and members can participate in this very easily - even members who are home bound or have no computers. They can mail brochures to their friends and family, make phone calls or have house parties. We are hoping that the numbers of participating New Yorkers will grow exponentially as more people make the switch. In addition, *Ethical Energy* (one of the suppliers) has offered to make a \$75 donation to 350.org for every new customer they sign up from this project.

If we seize opportunities and follow our passions, doors open. If we notice and walk through those doors the possibilities are endless. No one could have organized this, predicted it, or planned it. And sometimes good things simply happen if we create the space to welcome them.

Linking evolution and environmentalism, this past February the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island (EHSLI) organized a 10-week "Dinner and a Movie" series running "from Darwin Day to Earth Day." Every Thursday evening from February 9 through April 24th, EHSLI, along with co-host *Locally Long Island*, offered up a vegan soup supper provided by *Sweet to Lick*, a vegan bakery in Williston Park, followed by a movie. The movies addressed environmental and philosophical problems and the positive changes needed to save our ailing world from destruction. Each movie is followed by a discussion or presentation by an expert on the film's topic.

A terrific line-up of movies was offered along with an impressive list of speakers – a who's-who list of Long Island's most dedicated change agents. These include Melissa Boo of Locally Long Island, Amy Peters of Sustainable Sea Cliff Co-op, Chris Carter of the Hempstead Lake State Park Alliance, Jeannine Davis of the Waldorf School, Jon Stepanian of Long Island Food Not Bombs, Larry Foglia of the LI Community Agricultural Network, Eric Alexander of Vision Long Island, Marriele Robinson of the Long Island Progressive Coalition's Power-Up Communities, Eric Weltman of Food and Water Watch, Dr. Arthur Dobrin of the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island and Hofstra University, and Jeanne Brunsen of the Climate Reality Project. The full dates of movie listings and speakers can be found on www.locallylongisland.com/movies.

The movie series has been a fund-raiser and a "friend-raiser" for EHSLI. Most importantly, it allows for the dissemination of ideas and networking of old friends and new visitors to EHSLI as we discuss ways to save our planet.



Jon Stepanian of Long Island Food Not Bombs discusses the movie "Food Stamped."

Ethical Action Spotlight

I thank Liz Crouch Zelman, Monica Weiss, Alison Pratt and my fellow Ethical Culture Leaders for contributing text and ideas to this month's EAR. Let's continue the dialogue in our national movement – submit comments, articles and suggestions for future EAR editions! ~Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader, Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and Baltimore Ethical Society.

The Ethical Action Report 2.0

As Ethical Societies around the country continue their 2013-2014 program season, the EAR is evolving to try to be more useful to you and to generate more constructive, engaged dialogue about “deed before creed” throughout the movement. We hope this new format offers stimulating ideas and practical hints that make ethical action more effective and rewarding at your societies and in your lives.

EAR 2.0 hopes to offer:

- More in-depth analysis of particular social justice issues.
- Stories of ethical action projects that worked well at one of our societies and might enliven your home society.
- Discussion of ways to frame Ethical Culture's commitment to Ethical Action
- Excerpts from recent Ethical Culture platform addresses or statements from around the movement about civic, social, or ethical issues.

Join the fun! Offer your thoughts and news items for the May edition.

- Write about an issue with which you are familiar due to your professional life or private interest.
- Share news about an interesting ethical action project at your society, current or from the past.
- Write a “letter to the EAR editor” addressing any articles in this or future issues, or about other issues relating to our commitment to action.
- Do a historical reflection on an Ethical Action moment from Ethical Culture’s history.

The pieces can range from 250-1000 words, and if you submit them early, the editorial volunteers can help polish your offering. Feel free to float your idea by me at HughTM@gmail.com or send something to me by the 15th of the month prior to publication. All final copy has to be sent to me no later than the 25th of the month.

Sincerely,
Hugh

Hugh Taft-Morales - Ethical Culture Leader and *Ethical Action Report* Editor

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www.secular.org

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