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Why There is a Need to Ethically Reframe the Global Community's Relation to the Earth in the Current Ecological Crisis

Emily Blacker¹



Figure 1. "Big Fish Eat Little Fish" ("Big Fish Eat Little Fish," n.d.).

Central to Pieter Bruegel's 1556 drawing "Big Fish Eat Little Fish", which a year later Pieter van der Heyden created an engraving of (Figure 1, "Big Fish Eat Little Fish," n.d.), is a massive fish beached on the shore that is being cut open by a human holding a knife that is much larger than the human operating it. Smaller fish stream out of the beached fish's cut-open body, and also stream out of the beached fish's gaping mouth. These smaller fish appear to be headed towards re-entering the water; however, within the surrounding water, other large fish eating smaller-sized fish are depicted, as well as other humans fishing, suggesting that there is no hope of survival for the small fish. At the forefront of the image is a fishing boat in which an adult man is looking towards a child who is also in the boat, while simultaneously pointing in the other direction towards the massive beached fish. At the bottom of the image, there is a Flemish inscription which translates to: "[l]ook son, I have long known that the big fish eat the small" ("Big Fish Eat Little Fish," n.d.). This statement has been interpreted as the "vernacular form of the ancient Latin proverb, which appears in majuscule lettering just above, [which] relates to the theme of a senseless world in which the powerful instinctively and consistently prey on the weak" ("Big Fish Eat Little Fish," n.d.).

Within the image, the child points to the other man in the fishing boat with them who is holding a large fish, and pulling a smaller fish out from inside of it, with a knife held within his mouth. This gesture of the child pointing towards the man in the fishing boat suggests that the child understands the message that his father is communicating to him ("Big Fish

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Eat Little Fish,” n.d.). Further, the way in which the man and the child are pointing at right angles from one another serves to both *frame* the central image of the massive beached fish, and to foreground the *circularity* and repetitive nature of what is occurring, whereby the small fish are being captured by the large fish, and the large fish are being captured by the humans.

Bruegel’s “Big Fish Eat Little Fish” speaks powerfully to the moment of ecological crisis that we inhabit, wherein “[i]njustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering” (The Earth Charter, n.d.). The Earth Charter describes the current global situation in which “[t]he dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species” (n.d.). Further, The Earth Charter calls on the reader to first acknowledge that we inhabit “a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future,” stating that “*the future at once holds great peril and great promise*” (n.d., emphasis mine). Secondly, The Earth Charter calls on the reader to take action by way of enacting the four main principles and sixteen sub-principles.

Similarly, Bruegel’s “Big Fish Eat Little Fish” effectively forces the viewer out of a place of complacency, and draws the viewer “in” through the disturbing nature of the image (which is reinforced by the central figure of the massive beached fish being cut open), and through the level of detail included within the image, which invites the viewer to take a closer, more focused look at the image. The level of detail calls upon the viewer to engage with the image in a way that brings about more questions than answers, due to the elements of it that are beyond immediate rational understanding, such as the creature that is half-human and half-fish (with human legs and a fish’s body), that is carrying a smaller fish within its mouth, walking away from the shore towards the land, and the fish that is depicted as “flying” in the sky, taking the same shape as nearby birds. The viewer might also question the role of the human who appears to be climbing a ladder to reach the top of the massive beached fish, while holding a pitchfork that is very small in size compared to the massive fish it appears to be attempting to destroy. All of these questions prompted me to contemplate what Bruegel is saying about humanity, humanity’s relation to other non-human species, and humanity’s relation to the Earth in “Big Fish Eat Little Fish.”

Despite the many questions that the image brings forth for the viewer, and brought about for me personally, there is also a reassuring element of the image. I found myself focusing on the child in the fishing boat and how he may be understanding what is happening: the child recognizes that the big fish are catching and taking away the livelihood of the little fish, and that the humans, in turn, are catching and taking away the livelihood of the big fish. In this way, the child can be seen to represent the viewer of the image, who also, by way of engaging with the image, becomes hyper-aware of this cycle of destruction, violence, suffering, and injustice, which is made very clear, even while other elements of the image seem to be beyond rational comprehension. Not only does the viewer understand this problematic cycle, but they are called to question it, and, I would suggest, to take action to put an end to it through exercising their moral and ethical sensibilities.

Through my engagement with Bruegel’s “Big Fish Eat Little Fish,” the philosopher Peter Singer’s work, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (1972) came to mind, particularly in relation to Singer’s use of an applied, personal example to demonstrate his ethical position. Singer asks the reader to imagine that they encounter a child drowning in a pond while walking past it, and asks the reader to consider whether they would stop to pull the child out

and save their life, or keep on with their own priorities (Singer, 1972, p. 231). Singer's position is that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (1972, p. 231). In addition to this passage, the other relevant passage that came to mind for me is Singer's statement:

[i]t makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away. Secondly, the principle makes no distinction between cases in which I am the only person who could possibly do anything and cases in which I am just one among millions in the same position (1972, p. 231-232).

Singer's work is highly relevant to my own thinking on, and ethical approach to, the ecological crisis, primarily because of the way in which it calls readers out of their complacency, challenges their ways of understanding themselves as moral and ethical beings, and calls upon them to take action as moral beings to alleviate the suffering of others. In relation to one of the examples that Singer draws on in his work, that of famine, he links the indisputable evidence of famine to the need for humans to take ethical action with respect to this issue, stating, "[t]he facts about the existence of suffering are beyond dispute. Nor, I think, is it disputed that we can do something about it" (1972, p. 242). I apply this approach to the ecological crisis, and to what I view as the ethical imperative of The Earth Charter, in which the global community is being called on to take collective ethical action to "commit ourselves to adopt and promote the values and objectives of the Charter" (n.d.). The Earth Charter makes clear that "[e]very individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play" (n.d.).

From my perspective, a key root cause of the current global situation with respect to the ecological crisis is the cultural and political context wherein many humans consider themselves hierarchically superior to the Earth, including the land, and all non-human creatures that inhabit it, and therefore exercise their power over the Earth in ways that are destructive to it (though I want to note that there are exceptions to this tendency, including many Indigenous worldviews). Through human activities such as "industrialization, urbanization, and globalization," there has been an "unbridled exploitation of nature" over the last two centuries that has brought us to the current state of ecological crisis (Orobator, 2018, p. 108-115). This structural power imbalance through which human activities are destroying nature and the environment is portrayed in Bruegel's "Big Fish Eat Little Fish" not only through the depiction of humans capturing and destroying the fish (wildlife), but through details such as the "larger than life" size of the human's knife that is being used to cut open the massive beached fish. To me, this offers a powerful commentary on how humans have a tendency to put their own needs and desires ahead of others' needs and desires – the central positioning that Singer deconstructs and brings to the forefront as problematic in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." Humans' tendency to overlook what nature and the environment need – including plants, animals, waterways, and the land – is producing catastrophic consequences for the Earth and for future generations. This is not to mention the injustices inflicted on fellow humans that is also created as a result of this tendency, including those communities that are being disproportionately harmed by climate change and environmental contamination, who are not responsible for contributing to these effects,

such as the situation depicted in the documentary *Anoté's Ark* (2018), directed by Matthieu Rytz.

Bruegel's image also draws attention to the folly and short-sightedness of this human tendency through the proportionality in which the humans within the image are only a fraction of the size of the fish, and of the surface area of the water and the land. Additionally, the human climbing a ladder to reach the top of the beached fish, carrying a pitchfork, appears miniscule in comparison to the size of the fish, and the weapon appears as though it would not make a dent in the fish if the human were to attempt to employ it in this manner. To me, this is another example of what A.E. Orobator refers to in *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist*, with respect to the concept of the covenant, which, he states, "means we are in a collective and personal relationship with nature and our environment. *What affects us affects our environment and vice versa*" (2018, p. 121, emphasis mine).

Orobator refers to examples of "nature-speak," that "call[] humanity to take seriously the imperative of healing the earth and healing ourselves," including "irregular and extreme weather patterns leading to drought and flooding; desertification as a consequence of deforestation; [and] melting icecaps due to global warming, itself a consequence of greenhouse gas emissions" (2018, p. 122). The concept of "nature-speak" is effective in demonstrating all of the ways in which nature, and by extension, the Earth, asserts a voice that humans cannot any longer ignore, given the very powerful threat to the sustainability of life that it poses (Orobator, 2018, p. 122). In this way, the concept of "nature-speak" offers an antidote to the problematic power imbalances that have led to the current ecological crisis that we, as a global community, face (Orobator, 2018, p. 122).

Further, the concept of "nature-speak," to me, demonstrates that there is a direct connection between principle four of The Earth Charter, "Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace," and principle one, "Respect and Care for the Community of Life" (n.d.). It is only through "[r]ecogniz[ing] [that] all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings," that we, as a global community, are able to further "[r]ecognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which we are a part" (The Earth Charter, n.d.). It is in this way that Bruegel's "Big Fish Eat Little Fish" offers some hope for the future, as both the child in the fishing boat, and the viewer's recognition of the cycle of violence, injustice, and destruction suggests that the child within the frame, and the viewer outside of the frame, are positioned to enact change by creating, asserting, and maintaining "right relationships with [...] the larger whole of which we are a part" (The Earth Charter, n.d.). I also connect this concept with Andrea Smith's discussion, within the context of "Native feminist theologies," of the importance of "ordering right relations" in order to counteract power imbalances, and to "[b]e[] in balance with one another," including "[b]eing in balance with all [of] creation" (2010, p. 72).

In terms of where to go from here, I draw from Orobator's reference to "an ecological ethics of stewardship, respect, and care for the environment" that I see as a way to enact principle one of The Earth Charter, "Respect and Care for the Community of Life" (Orobator, 2018, p. 104). As discussed above, it is only through an ethical engagement with the Earth that works towards "ordering right relations" that we can alleviate the suffering of others, and commit to enacting and maintaining The Earth Charter's principle of "Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace" (Smith, 2010, p. 72). I also draw from Catherine Keller's concept of a "theology of becoming," which "insists upon our creaturely knowing-together, our

creativity and our responsibility as spokespeople for what we may call the *genesis collective*" (2012, p.16). Keller points out that "the very word 'genesis' literally means 'becoming'" (2012, p. 16). To me, a 'theology of becoming' offers an action-centric, non-static way for the global community to rethink, reframe, and alter its relation to the Earth by changing the manner in which we engage with it. I think that a generative approach might be in starting small – in addition to calculating our own carbon footprints, we can start by turning off our phones and opening our eyes and being more aware of environmental changes taking place in the localities where we live, including being attentive to water levels, and how new developments in cities might be destroying animals' and insects' habitats. In noticing these changes and through speaking with our neighbours and friends about them, we can create awareness. We can write to our MP or MPP, and we can write letters to the editor of our local newspaper. We can also work towards creating space for Indigenous voices – which often hold greater knowledge of the environment and how it is being altered – to be heard more readily.

In *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, Robin Diangelo states that the term "[w]hite fragility [...] may be conceptualized as the *sociology of dominance*: an outcome of white people's socialization into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy" (2018, p. 113). An important aspect of Diangelo's work is to raise awareness of the "current paradigm" of racism and to educate readers on the particular context in which the "sociology of dominance" has occurred, which has resulted in the reproduction of "white supremacy" (2018, p. 113; p. 144). Diangelo further states that "when our fundamental understanding of racism is transformed, so are our assumptions and resulting behaviours," which, in turn, directly impact "our environment, interactions, norms, and policies" (2018, p. 142). In addition to Diangelo's work, Ruth King's work, *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out* (2018), also speaks to the critical importance of becoming *aware* of our social conditioning regarding race as a first step, to ultimately enable us to take productive action in this arena. To take productive action, Ruth King suggests the formation of racial affinity groups, wherein people, ideally of the same race, form a group to discuss their social conditioning around race, and other related issues. King believes it is crucial that white people form such racial affinity groups to understand their whiteness, and the collective impact that their racial group identity has had on other racial groups.

It is clear that the current ecological crisis also calls for a paradigm shift in terms of the way in which we understand and engage with the Earth, in order to preserve its resources, and act in ways that will enable the possibility of a sustainable future. As someone who self-identifies as a lifelong student and education practitioner, I strongly believe that sub-principle fourteen of The Earth Charter, with its focus on education and life-long learning, is essential to confronting the realities of the ecological crisis as a global community, and taking action to preserve "a sustainable global community" by restoring "right relations" with the Earth (The Earth Charter, n.d.; Smith, 2010, p. 72). Drawing on Ruth King's notion of racial affinity groups, I plan to form what I am calling an 'Earth Charter kinship group,' in which I will rally a group of people to discuss both our personal and collective impacts on the environment, and formulate actions that each member can take, both personally and collectively, that demonstrate a commitment to, and enactment of, the principles of The Earth Charter. In doing so, I will demonstrate a commitment to, and enactment of, sub-principle fourteen of The Earth Charter: "[i]ntegrate into formal education

and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life” (n.d.).

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