Journal of Creative Research in English Literature & Culture (JCRELC)
ISSN: 3108-0812
[Vol-2, Issue-4, April 2026]
Website: www.jcrelc.com

Ethics and Ecology in the Economy of Existence

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Received:- 30 March 2026/ Revised:- 09 April 2026/ Accepted:- 18 April 2026/ Published: 30-04-2026

Abstract— *The transition from agrarian to industrial modes of life constitutes one of the most significant developments in human civilisation, producing ruptures across multiple levels of existence with profound ecological and ethical implications. While this progress has been defined by unprecedented knowledge acquisition and increased human control over environmental resources, it has simultaneously resulted in the depletion of the planet's wealth and growing apprehension that modern developmental trajectories may prove detrimental to human survival. This paper examines the historical origins of the ecological crisis, tracing its roots to European Enlightenment rationality and the birth of modern science. It argues that the modern conception of human freedom and rationality, while emancipatory in certain respects, has paradoxically legitimised the exploitation of other species and natural systems. Drawing on ecological economics (Nordhaus), historical analysis (Grayling, Habermas), and philosophical critique (Rousseau, Wittgenstein, Agamben), the paper proposes that redefining man not primarily as a rational or moral being but as a living being among other living beings may offer a more viable foundation for environmental ethics. The paper concludes by reflecting on the degeneration of critical reading culture in the digital age as a contributing factor to climate scepticism and intellectual paralysis.*

Keywords— Ecology, Existence, Modernity, Enlightenment, Environmental Ethics, Climate Crisis.

I. INTRODUCTION

One can understand a phenomenon only when one knows its origin. A true scientific analysis applies reason to observations in an attempt to discover the deepest mysteries of human nature and its relation to the physical world. The ecological conflagration of the present time must be set in a historical perspective if one aims to arrive at a possible course of action. It is partially the effect of that mode of knowledge and life which goes back to the birth of European science and its related developments—developments from which the world at large could not remain unscathed.

The transition from agrarian to industrial modes of life is perhaps one of the most significant developments in the history of civilisations, resulting in rupture at different levels of human existence with profound implications. This progress is defined by unprecedented acquisition of knowledge and maximisation of man's control over environment and its resources. For a very long time, the ancestors of modern man were quite helpless against the forces of nature, which led to its deification—a perception that largely informed moral and religious discourses. The development of European science over the last four hundred years has gradually changed this traditional perception of nature, and the subsequent development of technology transformed man's whole relation with his immediate environment, resulting in the destruction and depletion of the planet's wealth.

For the last few decades, there has been growing apprehension that the modern course of progress is detrimental to human survival. This apocalyptic vision has permeated contemporary scientific, social, political and literary discourses. Since the cosmic challenge is so complex, it seems to go beyond legal and political intervention alone. On the other hand, there is a growing suspicion and refutation of the scientific facts on which the consciousness of the crisis is based. Since there is no going back to the premodern stage of life, mankind must deal with the crisis from within the conditions of modernity itself. In this

situation, the paper intends to examine the contradictions of progress and explore some alternatives to heighten the consciousness of contemporary man about his immediate world in the general struggle for survival.

One can illuminate the equation of man and his environment by observing the small organic societies whose residues are deplorably left in the last phases of their disintegration and disappearance in developing economies. Reflections on such communities, where production and consumption are still not fully commodified, help one form an image of the earliest or pre-industrial mode of life—an image that can serve as an objective correlative for understanding the paradox of the industrial economy and its pernicious impact on ecology and human existence. There is a growing literature constituting the ecological discourse that projects an apocalyptic vision of the world, posing fundamental questions of human freedom and survival. Such questions will likely absorb the whole emotional and intellectual energy of posterity in the general struggle for existence.

II. THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

The birth of modern European science and the subsequent technological and economic progress have not only left a deep mark on other civilisations but also underline a series of ruptures at the level of human intellect and emotion, thought and feeling. Indeed, the history of mankind has passed through various vicissitudes, but the peculiar trait of the great transition of seventeenth-century Europe is that in the making of the scientific phenomenon only a few individuals were involved—whom A.C. Grayling calls "geniuses"—who changed the great premodern continuum of mankind into the modern. Grayling's hypothesis is that the seventeenth century changed the entire course of human history by creating a new consciousness in man about himself and the universe. In an age permeated with the fear of being dominated and the ambition to dominate others, European civilisation made a great leap in the discovery of knowledge. Grayling writes: "The realisation that there are other worlds, that the universe is stupendously larger and more complex than the pre-modern pictures of it were capable of suggesting, required a major intellectual revolution" (16). It required, among many imperatives, an intellectual emancipation from medieval and pre-modern mentality and assumptions about man and his world.

What is known as Renaissance, Reformation, or Enlightenment was, at an intellectual level, characterised by the consciousness to explore the world—an enterprise not without war and aggression against other civilisations and cultures under the veneer of the ideology of progress. This ideology at political and economic levels set mankind on an entirely different course of development. It created political and economic conditions in which mankind had to gradually renounce its traditional agrarian and cultural practices. When one reflects on colonialism and capitalism, one hardly fails to perceive the pernicious power of capitalism. Its dynamics lie in denying all pre-existing and existing modes of economic life. The study of anthropology and ethnology makes it clear that the ideology of progress gained impetus from the encounter with those civilisations still living on minimal technological and economic capital—against whom Thomas Hobbes could not suppress his prejudice. His description of natural man gives one a perspective on European modernism and individualism.

With the dawn of the modern era, mankind indeed made a great leap in its material and epistemological domains. The age of Galileo and Newton ushered in a new consciousness created by the explorers of the new world. The expeditions of Columbus and Pigafetta created a unique consciousness in European civilisation about other civilisations and also about man's place on this planet. Thus, the consciousness of European modernity is both textual and anthropological. As this consciousness came under intense critical scrutiny in the twentieth century under unprecedented historical and political conditions, it is rewarding to understand its nature and function—an understanding that may help one comprehend the predicament of our ecology and existence.

In his comprehensive study of European modernity, Enlightenment, and subsequent epistemological and economic developments, Habermas writes: "In his famous introduction to the collection of his studies on the sociology of religion, Max Weber takes up the 'problem of universal history' to which his scholarly life was dedicated, namely, the question why, outside Europe, 'the scientific, the artistic, the political, or the economic development… did not enter upon that path of rationalisation which is peculiar to the Occident?'" (01). For Weber, modernity and rationality are simultaneous phenomena. To Weber, according to Habermas, European rationalism signifies a cultural revolution, as Grayling also foregrounds. According to Habermas, this revolution for Weber marked "the process of disenchantment which led in Europe to a disintegration of religious world views that issued in a secular culture…. What Weber depicted was not only the secularisation of western culture, but also and especially the development of modern societies from the point of view of rationalisation" (01).

III. RATIONALITY, INDIVIDUALITY, AND THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM

The preceding observations bring to our speculation the coexistence of a plurality of modes of social organisation, diversity of culture, and alternative modes of economic life in the premodern world and pre-capitalist economy—modes that gradually

dissolved with the expansion of colonialism, forces of globalisation, and transition to industrial modes of economic production and consumption. Similarly, on the other hand, the normative value of rationality created scepticism regarding the perception of traditional values, ethics, and morality under the impetus of the ideology of progress. The idea of rationality propounded the notion of individuality based on assumptions peculiar to Occidental thought and probably alien to other civilisations. It is imperative to re-examine the paradox of this rationality and individuality.

Unlike the premodern age, modernity can be identified with a consciousness permeated by a peculiar sense of individuality and freedom—the very foundation of the philosophy of humanism. It was to promote individual freedom that all social, political, and economic institutions were conceived and established in modern Europe. This project set out to maximise and maintain the supremacy of man over nature and other species—a notion not without paradoxical implications, or what Agamben calls "dialectical tension" (12).

Our modern idea of freedom, seen through the history of Enlightenment, is a relatively recent phenomenon. The way it is being realised through economic and political institutions has not left other species unimpaired and unaffected. We still pursue it with the same delusion, without realising that the world we inhabit in the twenty-first century has fundamentally changed. Therefore, the modern conception of human rights, whose great principles were conceived primarily in the eighteenth century, looks paradoxical in retrospect. The principles of rights emanating from Enlightenment and inspiring the French Revolution were driven by the desire to abolish the privileges of nobility and the immunity of clergy to promote liberty.

The idea of man as a rational being is not without moral basis. But his material pursuit is in constant conflict with the universal rights of other species. However, if one wants to conceive a basis for human freedom that imposes its will without distinction, then one should redefine man not as a rational and moral being but as a *living being*. The idea of rationality and morality differs across civilisations. But the idea of man as a biological being is probably the most universally acceptable proposition, the implications of which can illuminate the course of mankind's past and present. The concept of rationality, with its associated ideal virtues, contradicts the rights of other species. But when man limits his identity to that of a living being, the rights of the human being stop whenever and wherever their exercise endangers the existence of others. If man's survival is so symbiotically dependent on other beings, then exploitation legitimised at the expense of others cannot continue forever without leading to the annihilation of others. Just before his death, the great physicist Stephen Hawking tried to make the world conscious of this fact—a dystopic vision that H.G. Wells had projected in his writings long ago. The right to life and free development of all living species should be considered the only indispensable right, because the extinction of any species causes an irreparable loss to the universe of creation.

IV. LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND THE SCHISM BETWEEN CONSCIOUSNESS AND LIFE

Most of mankind's problems are effects of the medium of communication. Wittgenstein puts it philosophically with remarkably curious brevity: all problems of man arise from the misunderstanding of the logic of language. Therefore, according to Wittgenstein, "it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact not problems at all" (27). Wittgenstein's deconstruction of the language of philosophy offers an insight on a different plane: that the demands of human thought and those of biology are based on inverse propositions. This schism between thought and life is probably a prominent feature of European modernity, the impact of which can be perceived at different levels of social, political, and economic policies.

The factors accounted for the bleak prospect of human survival are rooted in the self-consciousness of man of scientific civilisation. The whole endeavour of industrial man to protect the material environment is counterproductive. Nature is not like entities in museums. Nature should not be protected *for* man; rather, it should be protected *against* man. This underlines the fact that man himself is the cause of the problem of which nature has become the victim. The rights of other living species are rights *in regard to* man, not vice versa. Otherwise, the rate of extinction of species and destruction of nature may increase, imperilling human economy and survival.

V. ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS AND THE MORAL IMPERATIVE

William Nordhaus has taken the debate and discourse on climate change and its economic consequences to a new height by incorporating ecology in terms of economic value. He observes, on the morality of Cartesian rationality, in a manner that is illuminating both in retrospect and in anticipation. Nordhaus writes on the authority of Schopenhauer: "the assumption that animals are without rights and the illusion that our treatment of them has no moral significance is a positively outrageous example of western crudity and barbarity" (134). Nordhaus has drawn the world's attention to one of the most critical issues of our time—the catastrophic consequences of ecosystem annihilation—which earned him recognition from the Nobel Committee. Though there have been mass extinctions on earth over the last half billion years, as biologists and ecologists have

documented, there is growing apprehension, based on scientific observations and facts, that the combination of climate crisis and human influences will cause the next extinction. Nordhaus's great contribution lies in making the world aware that the value of ecosystems, like that of space, goes beyond commerce and economy:

> Economists have long recognised that people do not live by bread alone – there is a definite value of nonmarket activity. Many things that people care about are not produced and sold in markets … Understanding the economics of nonmarket activities is important because the impacts of climate change fall outside the marketplace… Of all the areas we have examined, the impact of climate change on species and ecosystems are the furthest from the markets … Some people may object that even asking these questions displays a crude materialism – that trying to weigh life against money is an immoral act. But this is surely wrong. The real immoral act involves omitting the values of these species when we count up the losses from climate change (125-126).

Nordhaus's analysis of the impact of global warming on agriculture, food production, and human health not only warns of an impending catastrophe but also calls for sensible and effective climate-conducive economic policies. His recommendation of taxation on carbon emissions is conceived in terms of mitigation. Beyond the environmental ethics of the individual, this requires government intervention to slow the pace of global warming. Since the challenge transcends individual nations, it requires international agreement and intervention. Nordhaus argues that unless the world, particularly the major economies, makes concerted efforts with stringent regulations and effective implementation, the crisis will reach the point of no return. The Kyoto Protocol was indeed an ambitious endeavour to develop an international framework that would effectively harmonise the economic policies of different countries. But countries did not find it economically in their long-term national interest. If the world is truly serious, countries should rise above their narrow and immediate interests—what Nordhaus calls the "nationalist dilemma"—for maximum national welfare in the long run (317).

VI. PREMODERN ETHICS AND THE QUESTION OF MORALITY

If man is a moral being, he is so only in the sense that his virtues promote the life of other species. It was this concept of morality—enunciated by some civilisations for the mutual preservation of species, elements of which can be perceived in the totemic beliefs of premodern civilisations, in the cultural practices of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, and most conspicuously in humble and illiterate peasantries—that once regulated human relations with nature. This humility was probably the ethics of agrarian communities throughout mankind's preindustrial condition. The societies that until recently lived on bare means of subsistence seemed to operate by the belief, however superstitious, that man is not the master of nature. By means of customs, superstition, and totemic beliefs, they restricted man's consumption and exploitation of other living and non-living beings and thus imposed a strict morality for mutual preservation.

It is a great irony of the Age of Enlightenment that all of our progress, particularly in the last two hundred years, has been at the expense of other species and fellow beings. Seen from this perspective, the role of education in the age of scientific enlightenment—in eradicating and undermining traditional beliefs—has resulted in contradictions today. Though the progress of civilisation is supposed to reform traditional belief and enlighten mankind about all forms of violence and despotism in social and cultural practices, one should not be ignorant of the fact that, despite refinement in the appearance of social existence, concealed forms of cruelty are inherent in governance and administration and in the general abuse of political power.

VII. THE ECONOMIC PARADOX: KEYNES ON PROGRESS AND PROSPERITY

There is no doubt that with the progress of knowledge and science, mankind has seen unprecedented improvement in the material composition of life. This newly discovered prosperity is historically a new phenomenon, though it has unfortunately not percolated to all sections of societies on the planet. Nevertheless, the magnitude of this prosperity is historically so unprecedented that it poses a series of economic and biological problems about which Keynes was apprehensive almost a century ago. The economist thought that with the progress of science, technology, and medicine, modern man has been able to somehow overcome problems against which his ancestors were helpless—namely, the fear of nature, of hunger, disease, and death. With technological development and medical progress, life in general is not so uncertain, particularly in advanced economies, as it was in the past.

What worries Keynes the most is not only the magnitude of progress and population but the suddenness with which it has happened—a development that, on reflection, staggers the imagination. Keynes writes: "From the earliest times of which we have record—back, say, to two thousand years before Christ – down to the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was no very great change in the standard of life of the average man living in the civilised centres of the earth" (360). Keynes rightly attributes the great continuum to two interconnected factors: lack of technological advancement and man's inability to

accumulate capital. With improvement in these spheres, human greed—which remained dormant for millennia—renewed its strength. For instance, one can speculate that the general standard of life in India at the end of the nineteenth century was not very different from what it had been for centuries. In the past, prosperity was confined to a very tiny minority while life in general was characterised by poverty.

Recent progress is not only unprecedented and historically unique but, given the great continuum of poverty, finite resources, and climatic cataclysm, the prospect of the current rate of progress and prosperity is very uncertain. Moreover, it has not been without debilitating effects on human health and happiness, social upheaval, and increasing economic inequality. These realities should enlighten those at the helm of power and policy regarding the direction in which the world is heading before it is too late and the whole progress proves pyrrhic. If man is a rational being, his rationality lies probably in this realisation.

The economic analyses by Keynes and Nordhaus also offer the insight that the requirements of life go beyond producing and feeding, and that for the health and happiness of mankind, equilibrium between production and consumption is a fundamental requirement. With the transition to industrial modes of production, the trajectory of development and the prospect of survival are running on cross purposes. This transition has caused such depletion of natural resources, extinction of species, and destruction of ecosystems that any effort at resolution is bound to absorb our whole mental and emotional energy. Since, unlike managed systems such as economic, financial, and political crises, the elements of environmental problems are largely unmanageable.

VIII. THE AGRARIAN ALTERNATIVE AND ROUSSEAU'S WARNING

The only possibility one can speculate upon is that of judicious living in consonance with rational policy that can have some mitigating effects. In this respect, one can imagine the small organic agrarian communities that, once so vibrant in India and elsewhere, are unfortunately in their final phase of disintegration and decay. Such communities can help one form an image of premodern societies that can serve as an objective correlative to explain the paradox of industrial civilisation. These communities—whose vestiges can perhaps still be discovered in inaccessible regions of India—maintained a healthy harmony and reveal an intimate working of all forms of life.

Given the cataclysmic prospect which mankind is perhaps doomed to face, it was in this stage that mankind was destined to stay by nature. It was in this mode of life that Rousseau, the great philosopher, thought mankind should have stopped, lest it suffer from regret and nostalgia:

> "There is, I feel, an age at which the individual man would wish to stop… Discontented with your present state, for reasons which threaten your unfortunate descendants with still greater discontent, you will perhaps wish it were in your power to go back; and this feeling should be a panegyric on your first ancestors, a criticism of your contemporaries, and a terror to the unfortunates who will come after you" (69).

More than two centuries ago, the great philosopher was unconsciously addressing the man of today. Had his contemporaries paid serious attention to the recluse genius, mankind might not have come to face this catastrophic end.

The transition from agrarian to industrial modes of life was not only an economic phenomenon. It created what Lewis Thomas calls "human chauvinism" (05). It imperceptibly changed the entire morality of man—his relation with nature as well as with his fellow beings. The consciousness of this discontinuity may not help mankind to go back, as we have reached almost a point of no return, yet it is necessary to remember that man is a living being and that his immediate challenge of survival goes beyond economic and political policies. Ecologists and economists are conscious of this fact. Nordhaus's comprehensive research contains exhaustive analysis and elaborate political and economic suggestions, but he is well aware that despite being a scientific and economic problem, it is also a moral imperative. This is what he seems to suggest in his observation: "True, scientific controversies have been central to public debates about global warming. However, in reality the ultimate source—and the solutions—lies in the realm of the social sciences" (17). Al Gore (awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 along with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), whose *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) revolutionised contemporary consciousness of the climate crisis, is more categorical: "by rising to meet the climate crisis, we will find the vision and moral authority to see all these not as political problems, but as moral imperatives" (214).

IX. INTELLECTUAL DEGENERATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The insight one gains from the observations of Nordhaus, Al Gore, and other sensitive ecologists and economists also makes one conscious, on a very different level, that those engaged in the study of language and literature have probably very little qualification to speak about such matters. Nevertheless, the only way they are capable of making any contribution—no less

significant—is to make one see how reason applied to observations can illuminate the deepest problems of man and his environment. Beyond the climate conventions and conferences on which millions of dollars are wasted, one should try to change one's perspective to reflect on the equation of ecological crisis and intellectual degeneration.

The degeneration of reason and the disintegration of virtues in the age of modern means of communication have left their pernicious effect on the health of democracy as well as ecology. This is what Al Gore seems to convey in his observation on the diminishing role of reason and logic in matters of political and economic policies and the increasing falsification of facts in the television and digital era. The flood of visual images circulated in rapid succession not only disrupts the power of concentration and reflection but also paralyses the rational faculty and the very capability of analysis and interpretation. This enervation of intellect can partially explain climate scepticism. Consequently, there is exponential growth of knowledge and greater accessibility to education, yet there is active denial of the knowledge of the climate crisis that is based on scientific facts, observations, and conclusions.

The intellectual health of man is not independent of the nourishment that reading is supposed to supplement. The birth of democracy and the development of reading culture in the post-printing era in Europe were simultaneous phenomena. Since the quality of people's thoughts is not independent of the means and mode of communication, the increasing loss of reading habit in the digital era has profound impact on the health of the human mind. Al Gore sees the culture of reading beyond technical advantages as an ethical exercise—a fundamental requirement of man's intellectual as well as spiritual health. In this respect, the growing tendency of consumerism—which Ramsey Clark, the former Attorney General of the United States, considers the most dangerous immorality and evil of modern times—and the loss of reading have an underlying relation with the degeneration of human consciousness and the prospect of survival.

X. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to trace the ecological crisis to its historical and intellectual origins in European modernity, Enlightenment rationality, and the transition from agrarian to industrial modes of production. It has argued that the modern conception of human freedom, while emancipatory in certain respects, has paradoxically legitimised the exploitation of natural systems and non-human species. Drawing on ecological economics, historical analysis, and philosophical critique, the paper has proposed that redefining man not primarily as a rational or moral being but as a living being among other living beings may offer a more viable foundation for environmental ethics. The paper has further suggested that the degeneration of critical reading culture in the digital age has contributed to climate scepticism and intellectual paralysis, exacerbating the very crisis that demands our most reasoned attention.

No solution is offered here with easy confidence. The problems are too deep, the contradictions too entrenched. But if there is a beginning, it lies in the recognition that man is not the master of nature but a participant in a community of living beings whose rights and existence are intertwined with his own. The path forward—if there is one—requires not a return to a romanticised premodern past but a judicious integration of rational policy, moral imperatives, and a recovered capacity for sustained, critical reflection. Whether mankind possesses the will for such a transformation remains the open question of our time

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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