

Ecological Governance: Toward a New Social Contract with the Earth

Bruce Jennings

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As director of bioethics for the Center for Humans and Nature and adjunct associate professor of health policy at Vanderbilt University, Bruce Jennings writes widely about ethical decision making. In *Ecological Governance*, he asserts that we must make “a new peace treaty with the planet.”

As the fossil-fuel era draws to a close, it is time to jettison the old model of treating the earth as a commodity, he argues. Rather than an instrumental relationship, the human-nature connection needs to be a trusteeship in which we accept our collective duty to care for and respect the earth. This requires a sense of common moral purpose and an understanding of the interdependence of all life.

By expounding on the historical development of the notion of the social contract—a key element of works by political philosophers Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke—Jennings gives his ideas a solid theoretical underpinning. The social contract, a set of accepted rules and roles, was meant to reflect the natural order and be broadly beneficial. Jennings believes that now that we are in the Anthropocene era, we cannot simply keep adapting old ways of doing things; we need to create a whole new economic worldview and “restructure our value priorities.”

Although this weighty ethics text mostly engages with the writings of several philosophers, Jennings is careful to illuminate the everyday implications for laymen. With inventive metaphors drawn from the arts—ranging from Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man to Hamlet—the book makes a clear case for “a way of being in the world that one can come to take on as lightly and unoppressively as a smile or a style.”

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