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## Moral entrepreneurship: Thinking and acting at the landscape level to foster sustainability transitions

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### ABSTRACT

This research contributes to an important yet overlooked theme in sustainability transitions scholarship: the role of normative deliberation in large-scale systemic change. We adopt the term “moral entrepreneur” to describe the deliberate efforts to change institutionalized moral norms, and thus foster sustainability transitions. We adopt an interdisciplinary approach and, by drawing on the institutional lens, synthesize the multi-level perspective from sustainability transitions studies with the scholarship on discursive action from organization and management studies to explore the mechanisms by which moral entrepreneurs contribute to transformative change. Based on an analysis of the creation of the American national parks in the early 20th century and specifically John Muir's role therein, we argue that moral entrepreneurs trigger landscape level changes by gradually disassociating rules and practices from their moral foundations through engaging in a macro-systemic discourse.

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## 1. Introduction

*The battle we have fought, and are still fighting, for the forests is a part of the eternal conflict between right and wrong, and we cannot expect to see the end of it. . . John Muir<sup>1</sup>*

In 2009, the European Union banned the import and export of most products made from seals. The decision was based on the conclusion that the methods used to kill and skin seals caused significant pain and suffering, a point that resonated with public opinion in the European Union. The ban served to express “moral outrage at the treatment of the animals, enshrining the moral beliefs of Europeans in legislation” (Howse & Langille, 2011, p. 371). Canada and Norway, the two largest exporters of seal products, contested the law and appealed to the World Trade Organization's (WTO) dispute settlement process to overturn the decision (Howse and Langille, 2012; Bailey, 2014). Nonetheless, on May 22, 2014, the WTO published a ruling in which it confirmed the EU's right to ban seal products on moral grounds (European Commission, 2014).

In September 2014, during the UN Climate Summit held in New York City, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund officially announced that it planned to divest from more than \$50 billion worth of fossil-fuel assets. The move was particularly symbolic, as the fortune of the Rockefeller family stems from the oil industry. More important, the move was explained in moral terms. Stephen Heintz, President of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, explained that the Fund was making “a moral

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<sup>1</sup> Muir, J. (December 1898). Among the Yosemite. *The Atlantic Monthly*. P. 751.

case,” and Valerie Rockefeller Wayne pointed out, “there is a moral imperative to preserve a healthy planet” (Warrick and Mufson, 2014; BBC News, 2014).

These two recent, unrelated examples illustrate that in disrupting the status quo – whether with new laws, products, programs, policies, organizations or even entire regimes – appeals to moral vocabulary and the language of ‘ought’ frequently appears as a central plank in an agent’s discursive quiver. Discourse rooted in the language of morality is frequently aimed at the twin goals of shifting norms and bringing about systemic change. Yet scholarly investigation of the relationship between moral discourse and agency has been limited.

This paper will investigate the phenomenon of moral agency – specifically moral entrepreneurship, discussed in more detail below – within the context of system change. Originally developed in the social cognitive identity theory (Aquino and Reed, 2002; Bandura, 1999, 2007), the concept of moral agency has been applied broadly across disciplines (see Moberg, 2006; Watson et al., 2007; Weaver, 2006;) to grapple with those interested in normative shifts and expressions. Drawing on the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 994), we conceptualize moral agency as a contextualized normative judgment and action to respond “to the demands and contingencies of the present.” Thus an actor that inhibits moral agency is primarily driven by an individual conceptualization of right and wrong (Bandura, 2007) and directs his/her thoughts and action towards enacted moral norms.

We explore the mechanisms by which agents appealing to and working with competing concepts of morality contribute to sustainability transitions. While doing so, we adopt an interdisciplinary approach and, by drawing on the institutional lens, synthesize the multi-level perspective (MLP) from sustainability transitions studies (Geels and Schot, 2007) with the scholarship on discursive action from organization and management studies (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Phillips and Oswick, 2012; Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

This theoretical pairing is not completely original; calls for the theoretical extension of the MLP while drawing on structuralism and exploring discursive dynamics have already been made (Geels, 2010). Structuralism scholars and particularly institutional theorists, have long been invested in conceptualizing how actors can contribute to institutional change (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988; Garud et al., 2007). The notion of institutional entrepreneur was developed by DiMaggio (1988) to explain how actors can change institutions endogenously, and who at the same time are defined by regulative, normative, and cognitive institutional forces – the phenomenon referred to as the “paradox of embedded agency” (Holm, 1995; Seo and Creed, 2002). According to Garud et al. (2007, p. 962), “to qualify as institutional entrepreneurs, individuals must break with existing rules and practices associated with the dominant institutional logic(s) and institutionalize the alternative rules, practices or logics they are championing.” This institutional view of the transformative change has been used in recent scholarship on social innovation to explain transformative agency (Westley et al., 2013, 2014; McCarthy et al., 2014; Riddell et al., 2012), as well as being recognized central in understanding “macro-cultural changes at the landscape level” in sustainability transitions scholarship (Geels, 2010; p. 505).

Institutional entrepreneurship, as adopted by social innovation and sustainability transition scholars, does not imply an element of moral agency. This absence becomes particularly problematic when institutional entrepreneurship is readily and widely adopted to explain the transformative change. Changes in normative expectations are possibly one of the most important qualities/indicators of transformative change (this confusion between cause and effect being possibly an explanation for normative discourse’s heretofore absence) – a change that occurs not only in the operational and management milieu but also profoundly alters the deeply rooted social phenomena. Yet, agent efforts to facilitate such changes remain largely unexplored in current social innovation and sustainability transitions scholarship.

In this paper we address two knowledge gaps: 1) the paucity of discussion of agency at the landscape level, and 2) the vague differentiation of moral agency from other forms of agency that contribute to transformative change. We adopt the term “moral entrepreneur” (Becker, 1963), which we will use from this point forward in this paper, to describe and differentiate moral agency from other types of agency (institutional entrepreneurship broadly) involved in sustainability transitions.

We begin with the premise that moral entrepreneurs target changes at landscape level. Normative rules that regulate normative expectations of regime actors (Geels, 2004) are the projections of deep symbolic and cultural structures existing on the landscape level. Therefore, a moral entrepreneur focuses at the landscape architecture that defines normative rules governing the regime. The difference between moral entrepreneurs and other types of institutional entrepreneurs is the former focus their work at a different scale. In contrast to other types of institutional entrepreneurs who are more concerned with managing connections between niche and regime levels by building up pressure from below (Geels, 2004; Hegger et al., 2007; Rauschmayer et al., 2015; Verbong and Geels, 2007), moral entrepreneurs connect niche level with landscape level, thus facilitating the pressure on the regime from the above. Institutional entrepreneurs work to transform the existing regime by introducing innovative solutions (Garud and Karnøe, 2003; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007; Munir and Phillips, 2005), whereas moral entrepreneurs are primarily oriented towards disrupting the existing regime, mainly by questioning the normative rules at the landscape level that support the regime in question, thus preparing the context for the emergence of new regime with new moral norms.

Based on the analysis of a historical case study of the creation of the American national parks system and John Muir’s role in that process, we argue that moral entrepreneurs prepare systems for change by gradually disassociating rules and practices that operate at regime level from their moral foundations that dwell at landscape level (Cascio and Luthans, 2014; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). We argue that moral entrepreneurs attack an existing regime by rather gradually undermining its structures of valuation. They do so through continuous discursive work. While drawing on the level-based delineation of

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