

Environmental ethics

1 .Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics is the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents. This entry covers: (1) the challenge of environmental ethics to the anthropocentrism (i.e., human-centeredness) embedded in traditional western ethical thinking; (2) the early development of the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s; (3) the connection of deep ecology, feminist environmental ethics, animism and social ecology to politics; (4) the attempt to apply traditional ethical theories, including consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics, to support contemporary environmental concerns; (5) the preservation of biodiversity as an ethical goal; (6) the broader concerns of some thinkers with wilderness, the built environment and the politics of poverty; (7) the ethics of sustainability and climate change, and (8) some directions for possible future developments of the discipline

2 . Deep Ecology

“Deep ecology” was born in Scandinavia, the result of discussions between Naess and his colleagues Sigmund Kvaløy and Nils Faarlund (see Næss 1973 and 1989; also see Witoszek and Brennan (eds.) 1999 for a historical survey and commentary on the development of deep ecology). All three shared a passion for the great mountains. On a visit to the Himalayas, they became impressed with aspects of “Sherpa culture” particularly when they found that their Sherpa guides regarded certain mountains as sacred and accordingly would not venture onto them. Subsequently, Næss formulated a position which extended the reverence the three Norwegians and the Sherpas felt for mountains to other natural things in general.

The “shallow ecology movement”, as Næss (1973) calls it, is the “fight against pollution and resource depletion”, the central objective of which is “the health and affluence of people in the developed countries.” The “deep ecology movement”, in contrast, endorses “biospheric egalitarianism”, the view that all living things are alike in having value in their own right, independent of their usefulness to

others. The deep ecologist respects this intrinsic value, taking care, for example, when walking on the mountainside not to cause unnecessary damage to the plants.

Inspired by Spinoza's metaphysics, another key feature of Næss's deep ecology is the rejection of atomistic individualism. The idea that a human being is such an individual possessing a separate essence, Næss argues, radically separates the human self from the rest of the world. To make such a separation not only leads to selfishness towards other people, but also induces human selfishness towards nature. As a counter to egoism at both the individual and species level, Næss proposes the adoption of an alternative *relational* "total-field image" of the world. According to this relationalism, organisms (human or otherwise) are best understood as "knots" in the biospherical net. The identity of a living thing is essentially constituted by its relations to other things in the world, especially its ecological relations to other living things. If people conceptualise themselves and the world in relational terms, the deep ecologists argue, then people will take better care of nature and the world in general.

As developed by Næss and others, the position also came to focus on the possibility of the *identification* of the human ego with nature. The idea is, briefly, that by identifying with nature I can enlarge the boundaries of the self beyond my skin. My larger—ecological—Self (the capital “S” emphasizes that I am something larger than my body and consciousness), deserves respect as well. To respect and to care for my Self is also to respect and to care for the natural environment, which is actually part of me and with which I should identify. “Self-realization”, in other words, is the reconnection of the shriveled human individual with the wider natural environment. Næss maintains that the deep satisfaction that we receive from identification with nature and close partnership with other forms of life in nature contributes significantly to our life quality. (One clear historical antecedent to this kind of nature spiritualism is the romanticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as expressed in his last work, the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*)

When Næss’s view crossed the Atlantic, it was sometimes merged with ideas emerging from Leopold’s land ethic (see Devall and Sessions 1985; also see Sessions (ed) 1995). But Næss—wary of the

apparent totalitarian political implications of Leopold's position that individual interests and well-being should be subordinated to the holistic good of the earth's biotic community (see section 4 below)—has always taken care to distance himself from advocating any sort of "land ethic". (See Anker 1999 for cautions on interpreting Næss's relationalism as an endorsement of the kind of holism displayed in the land ethic; cf. Grey 1993, Taylor and Zimmerman 2005). Some critics have argued that Næss's deep ecology is no more than an extended social-democratic version of utilitarianism, which counts human interests in the same calculation alongside the interests of all natural things (e.g., trees, wolves, bears, rivers, forests and mountains) in the natural environment (see Witoszek 1997). However, Næss failed to explain in any detail how to make sense of the idea that oysters or barnacles, termites or bacteria could have interests of any morally relevant sort at all. Without an account of this, Næss's early "biospheric egalitarianism"—that all living things whatsoever had a similar right to live and flourish—was an indeterminate principle in practical terms. It also remains unclear in what sense rivers, mountains and forests can be regarded as

possessors of any kind of interests. This is an issue on which Næss always remained elusive.

Biospheric egalitarianism was modified in the 1980s to the weaker claim that the flourishing of both human and non-human life have value in themselves. At the same time, Næss declared that his own favoured ecological philosophy—“Ecosophy T”, as he called it after his Tvergastein mountain cabin—was only one of several possible foundations for an environmental ethic. Deep ecology ceased to be a specific doctrine, but instead became a “platform”, of eight simple points, on which Næss hoped all deep green thinkers could agree. The platform was conceived as establishing a middle ground, between underlying philosophical orientations, whether Christian, Buddhist, Daoist, process philosophy, or whatever, and the practical principles for action in specific situations, principles generated from the underlying philosophies. Thus the deep ecological movement became explicitly pluralist (see Brennan 1999; c.f. Light 1996).

While Næss’s Ecosophy T sees human Self-realization as a solution to the environmental crises resulting from human selfishness and exploitation of nature, some of the followers of the deep ecology

platform in the United States and Australia further argue that the expansion of the human self to include non-human nature is supported by the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory, which is said to have dissolved the boundaries between the observer and the observed (see Fox 1984, 1990, and Devall and Sessions 1985; cf. Callicott 1985). These "relationalist" developments of deep ecology are, however, criticized by some feminist theorists. The idea of nature as part of oneself, one might argue, could justify the continued exploitation of nature instead. For one is presumably more entitled to treat oneself in whatever ways one likes than to treat another independent agent in whatever ways one likes. According to some feminist critics, the deep ecological theory of the "expanded self" is in effect a disguised form of human colonialism, unable to give nature its due as a genuine "other" independent of human interest and purposes (see Plumwood 1993, Ch. 7, 1999, and Warren 1999).

Meanwhile, some third-world critics accused deep ecology of being elitist in its attempts to preserve wilderness experiences for only a select group of economically and socio-politically well-off people. The Indian writer Ramachandra Guha (1989, 1999)

for instance, depicts the activities of many western-based conservation groups as a new form of cultural imperialism, aimed at securing converts to conservationism (cf. Bookchin 1987 and Brennan 1998a). “Green missionaries”, as Guha calls them, represent a movement aimed at further dispossessing the world’s poor and indigenous people. “Putting deep ecology in its place,” he writes, “is to recognize that the trends it derides as “shallow” ecology might in fact be varieties of environmentalism that are more apposite, more representative and more popular in the countries of the South.” Although Næss himself repudiates suggestions that deep ecology is committed to any imperialism (see Witoszek and Brennan (eds.) 1999, Ch. 36–7 and 41), Guha’s criticism raises important questions about the application of deep ecological principles in different social, economic and cultural contexts. Finally, in other critiques, deep ecology is portrayed as having an inconsistent utopian vision (see Anker and Witoszek 1998).

3 .Environment & feminism .

Broadly speaking, a feminist issue is any that contributes in some way to understanding the

oppression of women. Feminist theories attempt to analyze women's oppression, its causes and consequences, and suggest strategies and directions for women's liberation. By the mid 1970s, feminist writers had raised the issue of whether patriarchal modes of thinking encouraged not only widespread inferiorizing and colonizing of women, but also of people of colour, animals and nature. Sheila Collins (1974), for instance, argued that male-dominated culture or patriarchy is supported by four interlocking pillars: sexism, racism, class exploitation, and ecological destruction.

Emphasizing the importance of feminism to the environmental movement and various other liberation movements, some writers, such as Ynestra King (1989a and 1989b), argue that the domination of women by men is historically the original form of domination in human society, from which all other hierarchies—of rank, class, and political power—flow. For instance, human exploitation of nature may be seen as a manifestation and extension of the oppression of women, in that it is the result of associating nature with the female, which had been already inferiorized and oppressed by the male-dominating culture. But within the plurality of

feminist positions, other writers, such as Val Plumwood (1993), understand the oppression of women as only one of the many parallel forms of oppression sharing and supported by a common ideological structure, in which one party (the colonizer, whether male, white or human) uses a number of conceptual and rhetorical devices to privilege its interests over that of the other party (the colonized: whether female, people of colour, or animals). Facilitated by a common structure, seemingly diverse forms of oppression can mutually reinforce each other (Warren 1987, 1990, 1994, Cheney 1989, and Plumwood 1993).

Not all feminist theorists would call that common underlying oppressive structure “androcentric” or “patriarchal”. But it is generally agreed that core features of the structure include “dualism”, hierarchical thinking, and the “logic of domination”, which are typical of, if not essential to, male-chauvinism. These patterns of thinking and conceptualizing the world, many feminist theorists argue, also nourish and sustain other forms of chauvinism, including, human-chauvinism (i.e., anthropocentrism), which is responsible for much human exploitation of, and destructiveness towards,

nature. The dualistic way of thinking, for instance, sees the world in polar opposite terms, such as male/female, masculinity/femininity, reason/emotion, freedom/necessity, active/passive, mind/body, pure/soiled, white/coloured, civilized/primitive, transcendent/immanent, human/animal, culture/nature. Furthermore, under dualism all the first items in these contrasting pairs are assimilated with each other, and all the second items are likewise linked with each other. For example, the male is seen to be associated with the rational, active, creative, Cartesian human mind, and civilized, orderly, transcendent culture; whereas the female is regarded as tied to the emotional, passive, determined animal body, and primitive, disorderly, immanent nature. These interlocking dualisms are not just descriptive dichotomies, according to the feminists, but involve a prescriptive privileging of one side of the opposed items over the other.

Dualism confers superiority to everything on the male side, but inferiority to everything on the female side. The “logic of domination” then dictates that those on the superior side (e.g., men, rational beings, humans) are morally entitled to dominate and utilize

those on the inferior side (e.g., women, beings lacking in rationality, non-humans) as mere means.

The problem with dualistic and hierarchical modes of thinking, however, is not just that they are epistemically unreliable. It is not just that the dominating party often falsely sees the dominated party as lacking (or possessing) the allegedly superior (or inferior) qualities, or that the dominated party often internalizes false stereotypes of itself given by its oppressors, or that stereotypical thinking often overlooks salient and important differences among individuals. More important, according to feminist analyses, the very premise of prescriptive dualism—the valuing of attributes of one polarized side and the devaluing of those of the other, the idea that domination and oppression can be justified by appealing to attributes like masculinity, rationality, being civilized or developed, etc.—is itself problematic.

Feminism represents a radical challenge for environmental thinking, politics, and traditional social ethical perspectives. It promises to link environmental questions with wider social problems concerning various kinds of discrimination and exploitation, and fundamental investigations of

human psychology. However, whether there are conceptual, causal or merely contingent connections among the different forms of oppression and liberation remains a contested issue (see Green 1994). The term “ecofeminism” (first coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974) or “ecological feminism” was for a time generally applied to any view that combines environmental advocacy with feminist analysis. However, because of the varieties of, and disagreements among, feminist theories, the label may be too wide to be informative and has generally fallen from use.

4 . Disenchantment and the New Animism

An often overlooked source of ecological ideas is the work of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School of critical theory founded by Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969). While classical Marxists regard nature as a resource to be transformed by human labour and utilized for human purposes, Horkheimer and Adorno saw Marx himself as representative of the problem of “human alienation”. At the root of this alienation, they argue, is a narrow positivist conception of rationality—which sees rationality as an instrument for pursuing

progress, power and technological control, and takes observation, measurement and the application of purely quantitative methods to be capable of solving all problems. Such a positivistic view of science combines determinism with optimism. Natural processes as well as human activities are seen to be predictable and manipulable. Nature (and, likewise, human nature) is no longer mysterious, uncontrollable, or fearsome. Instead, it is reduced to an object strictly governed by natural laws, which therefore can be studied, known, and employed to our benefit. By promising limitless knowledge and power, the positivism of science and technology not only removes our fear of nature, the critical theorists argue, but also destroys our sense of awe and wonder towards it. That is to say, positivism “disenchants” nature—along with everything that can be studied by the sciences, whether natural, social or human.

The progress in knowledge and material well-being may not be a bad thing in itself, where the consumption and control of nature is a necessary part of human life. However, the critical theorists argue that the positivistic disenchantment of natural things (and, likewise, of human beings—because

they too can be studied and manipulated by science) disrupts our relationship with them, encouraging the undesirable attitude that they are nothing more than things to be probed, consumed and dominated.

According to the critical theorists, the oppression of “outer nature” (i.e., the natural environment) through science and technology is bought at a very high price: the project of domination requires the suppression of our own “inner nature” (i.e., human nature)—e.g., human creativity, autonomy, and the manifold needs, vulnerabilities and longings at the centre of human life. To remedy such an alienation, the project of Horkheimer and Adorno is to replace the narrow positivistic and instrumentalist model of rationality with a more humanistic one, in which the values of the aesthetic, moral, sensuous and expressive aspects of human life play a central part. Thus, their aim is not to give up our rational faculties or powers of analysis and logic. Rather, the ambition is to arrive at a dialectical synthesis between Romanticism and Enlightenment, to return to anti-deterministic values of freedom, spontaneity and creativity.

In his later work, Adorno advocates a re-enchanting aesthetic attitude of “sensuous immediacy” towards

nature. Not only do we stop seeing nature as primarily, or simply, an object of consumption, we are also able to be directly and spontaneously acquainted with nature without interventions from our rational faculties. According to Adorno, works of art, like natural things, always involve an “excess”, something more than their mere materiality and exchange value (see Vogel 1996, ch. 4.4 for a detailed discussion of Adorno’s views on art, labour and domination). The re-enchantment of the world through aesthetic experience, he argues, is also at the same time a re-enchantment of human lives and purposes. Adorno’s work remains largely unexplored in mainstream environmental philosophy, although the idea of applying critical theory (embracing techniques of deconstruction, psychoanalysis and radical social criticism) to both environmental issues and the writings of various ethical and political theorists has spawned an emerging field of “ecocritique” or “eco-criticism” (Vogel 1996, Luke 1997, van Wyk 1997, Dryzek 1997).

5 . Social Ecology and Bioregionalism

Apart from feminist-environmentalist theories and Næss's deep ecology, Murray Bookchin's "social ecology" has also claimed to be radical, subversive, or countercultural (see Bookchin 1980, 1987, 1990). Bookchin's version of critical theory takes the "outer" physical world as constituting what he calls "first nature", from which culture or "second nature" has evolved. Environmentalism, on his view, is a social movement, and the problems it confronts are social problems. While Bookchin is prepared, like Horkheimer and Adorno, to regard (first) nature as an aesthetic and sensuous marvel, he regards our intervention in it as necessary. He suggests that we can choose to put ourselves at the service of natural evolution, to help maintain complexity and diversity, diminish suffering and reduce pollution. Bookchin's social ecology recommends that we use our gifts of sociability, communication and intelligence as if we were "nature rendered conscious", instead of turning them against the very source and origin from which such gifts derive. Exploitation of nature should be

replaced by a richer form of life devoted to nature's preservation.

John Clark has argued that social ecology is heir to a historical, communitarian tradition of thought that includes not only the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, but also the nineteenth century socialist geographer Elisée Reclus, the eccentric Scottish thinker Patrick Geddes and the latter's disciple, Lewis Mumford (Clark 1998). Ramachandra Guha has described Mumford as "the pioneer American social ecologist" (Guha 1996, 210). Mumford adopted a regionalist perspective, arguing that strong regional centres of culture are the basis of "active and securely grounded local life" (Mumford 1944, 403). Like the pessimists in critical theory, Mumford was worried about the emergence under industrialised capitalism of a "megamachine", one that would oppress and dominate human creativity and freedom, and one that—despite being a human product—operates in a way that is out of our control. While Bookchin is more of a technological optimist than Mumford, both writers have inspired

a regional turn in environmental thinking.

Bioregionalism gives regionalism an environmental twist. This is the view that natural features should provide the defining conditions for places of community, and that secure and satisfying local lives are led by those who know a place, have learned its lore and who adapt their lifestyle to its affordances by developing its potential within ecological limits. Such a life, the bioregionalists argue, will enable people to enjoy the fruits of self-liberation and self-development (see the essays in List 1993, and the book-length treatment in Thayer 2003, for an introduction to bioregional thought).