

Summer 2009

Environmental Ethics

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Traditional theories may not suffice in the new field of environmental ethics

Larry Waggle (Philosophy) is working on an introductory text that posits the need for environmental ethics as a special subfield of study. Waggle argues that none of the traditional ethical theories as they are presently conceptualized provide adequate moral consideration for the non-human world. "This problem is an ancient one," he says. "The idea that human beings stand somewhere between the divine and other beasts is deeply rooted in the Western Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian heritage."

Waggle suggests that any attempt to place an environmental "overlay" onto one of the existing ethical theories will run into a serious problem or problems, namely those structural concepts that elevate human beings over all other entities. What is needed is a new system of values that does not automatically privilege human beings as the starting point for taking environmental concerns seriously.

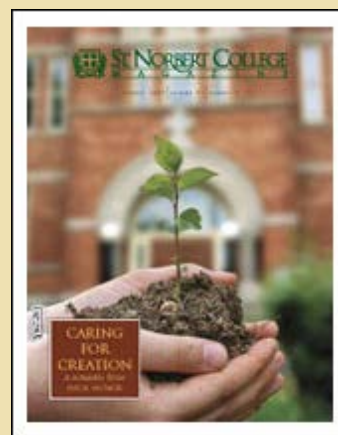
Here, he considers the variety of environmental ethical theories that exist presently in the literature: the conservation ethic, deep ecology, sustainability and ecofeminism.

The conservation ethic

The conservation ethic is an ethic of resource use, allocation, exploitation and protection. Its primary focus is upon maintaining the health of the natural world: its forests, fisheries, habitats and biological diversity. Secondary focus is on materials conservation and energy conservation, which are seen as important to protect the natural world.

To conserve habitat in terrestrial ecoregions and stop deforestation is a goal widely shared by many groups with a wide variety of motivations. To protect sea life from extinction due to overfishing is another commonly stated goal of conservation – ensuring that "some will be available for our children" to continue a way of life.

The consumer conservation ethic is sometimes expressed by the four R's: "Reduce, Recycle, Reuse, Rethink." This social ethic primarily relates to local purchasing, moral purchasing, the sustained and efficient use of renewable resources, the moderation of destructive use of finite resources and the prevention of harm to common resources such as air and water quality, the natural functions of a living earth, and cultural values in a built environment.



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Environmental ethics

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The principle value underlying most expressions of the conservation ethic is that the natural world has intrinsic and intangible worth along with utilitarian value – a view carried forward by the scientific ecology movement and some of the older Romantic schools of conservation.

More utilitarian schools of conservation seek a proper valuation of local and global impacts of human activity upon nature in their effect upon human wellbeing, now and to our posterity. How such values are assessed and exchanged among people determines the social, political and personal restraints and imperatives by which conservation is practiced. This is a view common in the modern environmental movement.

These movements have converged but they have deep and common roots in the conservation movement. ... There are at least two ways of thinking about conservation. The first we can call the “hands-off” mentality, where mainly land is placed in reserve for the aesthetic enjoyment of present citizens. The idea here is that these reserves should not be developed for any reason. The second we can call the “careful use” mentality, where natural resources are managed and harvested for continuing use of those resources. The idea here is that, by careful management and use of natural resources, there will be plenty available for future generations. Many questions remain concerning what constitutes “careful management and use” of the natural resources.

Philosophically speaking, there is nothing in the conservationist ethic that would determine whether a “hands-off” or “careful use” approach better achieves the goals of this ethic. Further, the conservation ethic tells us nothing concerning the status of non-human species (do they have intrinsic value, do we simply leave the reserves alone, how much human intervention in the reserves is tolerable.) Besides the four R's, there is little this ethic tells us about how we should act. I would suggest that conservationism is more of a popular movement than a full-blown ethical theory.

Deep ecology

Deep ecology is a recent branch of ecological philosophy (ecosophy) that considers humankind as an integral part of its environment. It places more value on other species, ecosystems and processes in nature than is allowed by established environmental and green movements, and therefore leads to a new system of environmental ethics.

The core principle of deep ecology as originally developed is Naess's doctrine of biospheric egalitarianism – the claim that all living things have the same right to live and flourish – a principle that, after criticism, has been substantially qualified.

Deep ecology describes itself as “deep” because it is concerned with fundamental philosophical questions about the role of human life as one part of the ecosphere, rather than with a narrow view of ecology as a branch of biological science, and aims to avoid merely utilitarian environmentalism.

The phrase “deep ecology” was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973. For Naess, ecological science, concerned with facts and logic alone, cannot answer ethical questions about how we should live. For this we need ecological wisdom.

Deep ecology seeks to develop this by focusing on deep experience, deep questioning and deep commitment. These constitute an interconnected system. Each gives rise to and supports the other, while the entire system is what Naess would call an ecosophy: an evolving but consistent

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philosophy of being, thinking and acting in the world that embodies ecological wisdom and harmony.

Naess rejected the idea that beings can be ranked according to their relative value. For example, judgments on whether an animal has an eternal soul, whether it uses reason or whether it has consciousness have all been used to justify the ranking of the human animal over other animals. As such, deep ecology would support the view of Aldo Leopold in his book "A Sand County Almanac": that humans are not a superior species with the right to manage and control the rest of nature, but rather that humans are "plain members of the biotic community. They also would support Leopold's "land ethic": "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community." It is wrong when it tends otherwise. ..."

Although this ethic does answer many of the philosophical concerns conservationism left us with, there are other concerns with its stated principles. For example, if something is right insofar as it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community, and modern consumerist economic activity has caused a reduction of biodiversity and ecological damage, then to what extent ought we to restore the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community? ... The vagueness of deep ecology as an environmental ethic appears to be systemic.

Sustainability

Sustainability is an attempt to provide the best outcomes for the human and natural environments, both now and into the indefinite future. One of the most formidable definitions has been given by the Brundtland Commission, led by former Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, who defined sustainable development as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." It relates to the continuity of economic, social institutional and environmental aspects of human ecology, as well as the non-human environment. ...

I see the sustainability movement as developing out of deep ecology and conservationism. One of its main strengths is that it takes a balanced approach to resource use, for human as well as non-human beings. As a theory, there is much that it suggests what we ought to do concerning how we construct our buildings and cities. As a movement, it tells us little about what we ought to do about repairing the environment. The suggestion seems to me that if we live with the smallest possible environmental footprint, then environmental processes will stabilize the existing damage. To me, this sounds very optimistic. What is needed is verification by science that the environment can, in fact, "correct" itself. This being said, there is much promise in sustainability as a movement. ...

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a social and political movement that unites environmentalism and feminism, with some currents linking deep ecology and feminism. Ecofeminists argue that a relationship exists between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature, and explore the intersectionality between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, speciesism and other characteristics of social inequality. ...

A central tenet in ecofeminism states that male ownership of land has led to a dominator culture (patriarchy) manifesting itself in food export, over-grazing, the tragedy of the commons, exploitation of people and an abusive land ethic, in which animals and land are valued only as economic resources.

Other ecofeminists explain how the degradation of nature contributes to the degradation of women. For example, Barbara Thomas-Slayter and Dianne Rocheleau detail how, in Kenya, the capitalist-driven export economy has caused most of the agriculturally productive land to be used for monoculture cash crops. This leads to intensification of pesticide use, resource depletion and marginalization of the subsistence farmers, especially women, to the hillsides and less productive land, where their deforestation and cultivation led to soil erosion, furthering the environmental degradation that hurts their own productivity. ...

Some ecofeminists point to the linguistic links between oppression of women and land, such as the terms "rape the land," tame nature" and reap nature's bounty." Terms also express nature as feminine (using the pronoun "she" and the term "Mother Nature") and women as "wild" and "untamed" (like nature). Ecofeminists also criticize Western lifestyle choice, such as consuming food that has traveled thousands of miles and playing sports (such as golf and bobsledding) that inherently require ecological destruction. ...

So long as ecofeminism continues to rely on the notion of equality (between humans and nature) either this theory will remain a critical but not constitutive one, or will be subject to the same criticisms leveled against liberal feminism. Although it did achieve its goals of political participation and legal status of women, these goals did not go far enough to achieve the liberation of women. As is the case in equality of opportunity, there may be additional guarantees needed for the environment or non-human species that are different from those held by humans and unique to non-human species.

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