ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Reconciling Self, Society, and Nature in Environmental Ethics

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This paper proposes an environmental ethic that adopts human flourishing, social justice, and environmental integrity as its guiding objectives. It suggests that each of these concerns should be given equal moral weight and that contradictions between them arise only in the context of a capitalist development paradigm committed to excessive production and consumption for a minority of the earth's people that is ultimately neither ecologically sustainable nor humanly satisfying. An alternative paradigm based on a transactional view of the relationship between self, society, and nature could meet each of these three goals by shifting the focus to production for human needs that emphasizes social justice and environmental sensitivity.

Three Objectives for Environmental Ethics

In contrast to both "anthropocentric" and "ecocentric" approaches to environmental ethics, which dichotomize the relationship between the human and the natural and then proceed to privilege the concerns of one over the other, a transactional perspective, based on Steiner's "human ecological triangle,"[1] sees self, society, and nature as each both constituting and being constituted by the others. In the transactional view, the self does not exist apart from the relations it has with both its social and natural environments. Social environments, for their part, have no reality apart from either the individuals that comprise them or the natural environments that sustain them. Natural environments can also be seen as both making certain forms of life and society possible, while in turn being modified by the forms of life and society that are actually created. From a transactional perspective, it is impossible to dichotomize the relationship between the human and the natural. Therefore, it is also impossible to privilege the concerns of one over the other.

Using the three poles of Steiner's model as a guide, at minimum it is proposed that environmental ethics should meet the following three objectives: (1) maximizing human flourishing in the sense of providing for both the material needs of individuals and their

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[1] Dieter Steiner, "Human Ecology as Transdisciplinary Science, and Science as Part of Human Ecology," in Dieter Steiner and Markus Nauser (eds.), *Human Ecology* (London: Routledge, 1993).

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full psychological, social, and cultural development; (2) achieving social justice both within and between cultures; and (3) promoting environmental integrity sufficient to allow both human and non-human life to thrive. These goals are not exhaustive, of course. One could imagine adding supplementary arguments, for example, to preserve specific natural areas (e.g., a given natural area should be preserved for its aesthetic or recreational value, even if destroying the area would not reduce overall biodiversity) and to protect specific life forms (e.g., animals should not be used in scientific experiments, even though such use would not reduce overall biodiversity).

Other writers have similarly suggested that ethics should concern itself with providing for human, social, and environmental well-being.[2] Marshall's "ecotopian vision," for example, suggests that people in relation to themselves would be concerned with developing the full range of their potential rather than confining themselves to a consumer mentality. People in relation to society would be concerned with providing for the basic material needs of all members of society while embracing a concept of equality that recognizes that different individuals (such as the disabled) have different needs. Finally, people in relation to nature would be concerned with both using resources wisely and preserving ecological diversity. Marshall's ecotopian society is based on a social libertarian perspective which gears production towards the satisfaction of human needs rather than towards profit, and relies on decentralized, rather than centralized, forms of decision-making and control.

Bookchin, also writing from an essentially social libertarian perspective, advocates an "ecology of freedom" which preserves a measure of autonomy for self, society, and nature by seeing the relationship between each of these three poles in what are, essentially, transactional terms:

> An ecological ethics of freedom thus coheres nature, society, and the individual into a unified whole that leaves the integrity of each untouched ... The social derives from the natural and the individual from the social, each retaining its own integrity and specificity through a process of ecological derivation. The great splits between nature and society and between society and individuality are thus healed.[3]

Both the alienation of humanity from nature and the alienation of the individual from society are primarily the result of one pole dominating the others, which results in hierarchical rather than genuinely transactional relationships.

Viewing ethics from a transactional perspective, the good of one pole can only be realized if the good of the other poles is simultaneously realized. The classic Aristotelian

[2]See, for example, Erwin Anton Gutkind, *Community and Environment* (London: Watts and Co., 1953); Tetsuo Watsuji, *Climate and Culture*, translated by Geoffrey Bownas (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1961); Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982); Lester W. Milbrath, *Envisioning a Sustainable Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Richard Sylvan and David Bennett, *Of Utopias, Tao and Deep Ecology*, Discussion Papers in Environmental Philosophy, No. 19 (Australian National University, 1990); Peter Marshall, *Nature's Web* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1992).

[3]Murray Bookchin, *The Modern Crisis*, 2nd ed. (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1987), p. 36.

notion that good selves cannot be produced in the absence of good societies and, conversely, that good societies cannot be produced in the absence of good selves illustrates the transactional perspective on the ethical relationship that exists between individuals and society. This insight also applies to the relationship between individuals and nature and the relationship between society and nature. In the first instance, good individuals cannot be produced in the absence of good natural environments and vice versa; in the second, good societies cannot be produced in the absence of good natural environments and vice versa. Humans are, in this formulation, *both* political and natural beings.

Reductionist approaches to ethics, which are the norm in many societies today, also result in an imbalance between human flourishing, social equity, and environmental integrity. Tyrannical societies, for example, squelch the autonomy of the individual, just as unchecked individualism squelches all hope for achieving a just society. Ethical perspectives that emphasize individual over social interests (e.g., emotivism, some forms of existentialism, individualistic anarchism, postmodern nihilism, and much Western liberal thought) fail to note the extent to which individual action is influenced and constrained by existing social structures and thus regard the individual as the final arbiter of values. When conflicts between the two arise, individual interests are seen as trumping social interests.

Ethical perspectives that do the reverse and emphasize social over individual interests (e.g., Bradley,[4] cultural relativism, Asian collectivism, communitarianism, and some interpretations of Marxist thought) see society as the final arbiter of values and fail to note the extent to which individuals can challenge existing social arrangements. When conflicts occur, social interests are seen as trumping individual interests. While there may be specific cases in which a judgment is made that one set of interests should trump another, the primary task of social ethics is not to privilege the individual over the group or the group over the individual but rather to work out a satisfactory harmonization of individual and social interests. Ethical dilemmas in social ethics arise only when the two sets of interests are out of harmony with each other.

Much the same analysis can be applied to the attempt to work out an environmental ethic that harmonizes human and environmental interests. Humans can be seen as dominating nature or, equally oppressive, nature can be seen as dominating humans. While the view that human interests should always trump environmental considerations leads to ecological devastation, the view that environmental concerns should always trump human concerns leads to an equally unconscionable misanthropy.[5] Other combinations are possible, of course. Societies can be imagined that preserve ecological integrity and/or human flourishing (for some) but are socially unjust. There can be societies that provide for human flourishing and/or social justice but not for environmental integrity. Societies that are socially just and/or ecologically sustainable but do not provide for human flourishing are also possible.

[4]F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951).

[5]*Cf.* Murray Bookchin, *Re-enchanting Humanity* (London: Cassell, 1995).

The problem, then, is not only how to achieve forms of culture that are sustainable over the long-term and conducive to human flourishing, but also how to achieve forms of culture that preserve rather than encroach on biodiversity and the autonomy of nature. Human action can either advance or impede the processes of natural and cultural evolution. Some actions may promote the development of greater diversity in both the natural and the cultural spheres, while other actions may simplify complexity and reduce possibilities for evolutionary development.

It is insufficient, of course, to argue in favor of preserving both cultural and biological diversity simply on the grounds that diversity is good in and of itself. Clearly, a world that is culturally and biologically diverse provides richer social and natural environments for individuals to interact with in more complex and potentially more rewarding ways. Increased diversity thus allows increased opportunities for individual self-realization. In this sense, a diverse world is indeed preferable to a world that lacks diversity. But it cannot be concluded from this argument that all forms of diversity are, therefore, good. Some forms of diversity may be positive, while others may be negative. It would be difficult to argue, for example, that increasing the diversity of either criminal behavior or biological diseases would be good simply on the grounds that such diversity provides a "richer" social or natural environment for people. Judgments must still be made regarding what forms of diversity should be encouraged and what forms of diversity can or should be reduced.

Overcoming the Contradictions

A transactional perspective is undoubtedly incompatible with the view that consumerism (at the individual level) or industrialism (at the social level) should be allowed to trump environmental concerns. But, as mentioned above, the transactional perspective is equally incompatible with the view that environmental concerns should take precedence over individual or social concerns. Milbrath, for example, argues that ecological sustainability should be a primary value on the grounds that it supports other, higher values; without ecological sustainability these higher values could not be realized.[6] There is an obvious sense in which this is correct. Ecological integrity can be seen as being more fundamental than social justice or personal well-being, precisely because it is more inclusive. The individual can be seen as a subset of society and society as a subset of nature. Thus, while nature can exist in the absence of individuals or societies, individuals and societies cannot exist in the absence of nature.

It is doubtful, however, whether any given *ontological* ranking of nature, society, and the individual necessitates the same *value* ranking. Prioritizing the three values in the way Milbrath does seems to imply that societies matter more than individuals and that nature matters more than human societies, a position that begins to resemble ecofascism,[7] although this certainly is not Milbrath's intention. By taking a dialectical approach

[6]Milbrath, *op. cit.*

[7]Michael E. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

that seeks to integrate these various concerns within the framework of a single ethical "schema," an ethic can be constructed in which it is possible for all three values to be simultaneously realized. None of these concerns can be accorded more importance than the others, and there is nothing inherently antagonistic between them. Human flourishing does not necessitate a loss of biodiversity, for example, nor does maintaining ecological integrity require authoritarian political measures. Such conflicts are contingent upon human choices and social practices rather than necessary in any physical or metaphysical sense.

Human flourishing, social justice and environmental integrity are only at odds with each other within the context of a capitalist economy and society where the bottom line philosophically underpins all measures of progress—individual, social, and environmental. Our capitalist economy and society, for example, defines human well-being in terms of achieving high levels of consumerism. Social justice is seen as helping the "poor" attain the same high levels of consumption as the rich. "Sustainable development" is defined in terms of what must be done, not to sustain natural diversity, but rather to sustain high levels of consumption on a universal scale. Even if these goals are accepted as valid, it is clear that the capitalist development paradigm has been a spectacular failure on its own terms. Capitalism can be criticized *precisely* on the grounds that it has failed to provide a sufficiently high quality of life for all, has exacerbated rather than reduced economic inequality, and has resulted in increased environmental degradation. It can be argued that the capitalist development paradigm itself is frequently the *cause of,* rather than the *solution to*, the problems of human poverty, social injustice, and environmental destruction.[8]

Alternatively, a transactional paradigm would encourage human flourishing, social equality, and environmental integrity. But for this to work, the current concepts of human flourishing, social equity, and environmental integrity need to be reevaluated. Human flourishing must be redefined as that which provides for the basic material needs of individuals as well as their full psychological, social, and cultural development. Justice, now equated with efforts to "help" Third World countries "catch up" with First World countries, must be recast as a more equitable distribution of existing resources, which reduces overconsumption and enables basic human needs to be met on a universal basis. Finally, environmental sustainability, which is currently defined as managing resources in ways that sustain current rates of economic growth, must be redefined so that resources are conserved to meet basic human needs and natural habitats are preserved to both maintain biodiversity and allow the continued evolution of non-human species, with the economic system reconfigured to serve those goals.

Potential conflicts between the three objectives can be resolved through the use of "priority rules," which Norton defines as ". . . rules for deciding which principles take precedence when more than one applies."[9] While the adoption of any such rules would

[8]See Richard Evanoff, "The Case Against Free Trade," *The Aoyama Journal of International Politics, Economics, and Business*, 58, October, 2002, pp. 75–94, which includes an extensive bibliography.

[9]Bryan G. Norton, *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 237.

naturally be subject to public debate, the following specific priority rules are proposed for adjudicating potential conflicts between the three objectives:

The requirement for a high quality of life can be satisfied by keeping population within levels that allow not only for survival but also for a relatively high standard of living within sustainable limits. Satisfying the essential needs of all individuals at levels of population in ways that do not threaten ecological integrity needs to be top priority. The consumption of non-essential goods would be permissible only if it does not violate the principles of social justice, is sustainable, and does not lead to a loss of biodiversity.

The requirement for social justice can be satisfied by insuring that everyone who will be affected by a particular decision has the right to participate in the decision-making process. While complete equality both between individuals and communities may be neither possible nor necessary, justice demands the avoidance of any form of exploitation that allows some individuals and groups to benefit at the expense of others.

The requirement of ecological integrity can be satisfied by insuring that humans do not interfere with natural environments to the extent that they threaten the ability of non-human species to perpetuate themselves or otherwise impede evolutionary processes. Natural resources can be used for human purposes, provided that overall biological diversity is not reduced. Biological diversity could be legitimately reduced only in extreme situations where all possibilities for remaking society in more ecological ways had been exhausted. Nature can and should also be preserved for other values, such as aesthetics and recreation.

Transactionalism and Social Change

In our present situation, the choice is not between whether to preserve natural environments or to satisfy basic human needs; rather, the choice is between whether societies are structured in a way that enables the basic needs of all to be filled in an environmentally sustainable way or that permits the luxury demands of the few to be filled in an environmentally destructive and socially unjust way. Given the choice between saving the last rhinoceros on earth or killing the rhinoceros to feed our own starving children, most of us undoubtedly would choose to kill the rhinoceros. Although such thought experiments are sometimes engaged in to test the limits of a given theory, the abstract principles one arrives at by employing them may have only limited applicability in the context of what is, in fact, our present situation. The present scale of environmental destruction simply cannot be justified on the grounds that it is necessary to satisfy genuine human needs. Genuine human needs can be more than adequately met through the reduction of opulent overconsumption, the equitable distribution of resources, the promotion of economic justice, the expansion of participatory democracy, and so forth. Such changes are, no doubt, revolutionary in the sense that they would require precisely the kind of deep and significant changes in current socio-political structures that the defenders of capitalism are prepared to wage wars to avoid.

Hunt similarly argues that there is only a conflict between environment and economic development when production is geared towards the self-expansion of capital rather

than towards ". . . the participatory-democratic control of production to serve collective human good."[10] Development for meeting genuine human needs rather than simply accumulating profit is fully compatible with an environmentalism that acknowledges both the need to protect wild nature and the need of humans to legitimately use natural resources in a way that satisfies those needs.

Achieving a balance between both human and environmental concerns means finding ways to live that allow us to flourish as individuals, while at the same time insuring that the societies we live in are just, and the environments we inhabit are healthy. It means constructing societies that can legitimately suppress the "freedom" of both consumers and corporations when they threaten the ability of other humans and non-humans to flourish, and yet which allow for a high degree of democratic participation in the construction of social goals. It means adopting an attitude towards nature that acknowledges the legitimate use of natural resources to sustain human life but simultaneously realizes that human sustenance is not dependent on the massive destruction of ecosystems and the extinction of species.

The problem is not that the earth does not provide enough resources to sustain human culture, but rather that certain forms of culture aspire to excessive achievements that the earth is unable to adequately provide for. The "environmental problem," therefore, should be redefined as a "human problem." In Commoner's words, "When any environmental problem is probed to its origin, it reveals an inescapable truth—that the real root cause is to be found in how men [sic] interact with other."[11] The human relation to the environment has historically been defined in terms of humans attempting to modify nature in order to satisfy human wants. Instead of trying to fit the environment to meet our wants, we should try to fit our wants to meet what the environment can provide. If a culture is unable to sustain itself except through the systemic exploitation of either nature or humans, then there is something fundamentally wrong with the culture, and it is legitimate to take action to change that culture.

Rather than bring human aspirations into line with objective possibilities, defenders of the capitalist development paradigm promote a self-deceptive vision of the future that contends that there are no ultimate social or environmental limits to human aspirations. While an alternative transactional paradigm may be utopian in a political sense—i.e., it believes that humans are indeed capable of creating societies that promote human flourishing, are socially just, and preserve environmental integrity—it, in fact, has a clearer sense of the possibilities that are objectively available to us in our present situation. Its vision of the future is one in which human aspirations are brought into line with those

[10]Geoffrey Hunt, "Is There a Conflict Between Environmental Protection and the Development of the Third World?" in Robin Attfield and Barry Wilkins (eds.), *International Justice and the Third World* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 144. See also Robin Attfield, "Development and Environmentalism," in the same volume; and Arne Naess, "The Third World, Wilderness, and Deep Ecology," in George Sessions (ed.), *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995).

[11]Quoted in Smitu Kothari and Pramod Parajuli, "No Nature Without Social Justice: A Plea for Cultural and Ecological Pluralism in India," in Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *Global Ecology* (London: Zed Books, 1993), p. 224.

possibilities. Put paradoxically, while the "utopian" ecological vision is ultimately realistic, the "realistic" view of the capitalist development paradigm is ultimately utopian.

Mystifications may indeed be effective in promoting forms of false consciousness that make it difficult for the goals of the capitalist development paradigm to be challenged and alternatives to be proposed. It is easy for defenders of the capitalist development paradigm to dismiss the alternative vision offered here as "utopian," while calls for helping the poor "catch up" with the rich are portrayed as "realistic." Progress, conceived as attaining ever-higher levels of material affluence, is defended on the grounds that it is "human nature" for people to seek to improve themselves. By regarding human nature as "fixed," it can then be argued that it is the natural environment that must be transformed to meet human aspirations. A transactional perspective would contend, to the contrary, that there is no fixed "human nature," and hence it is also possible to transform aspirations in ways that bring them within the constraints of what the natural environment is able to sustainably provide. True progress, therefore, consists in attaining forms of culture that are able to provide for human well-being in ways that are also environmentally sensitive.

Given present levels of political consciousness in our global society, it is indeed difficult to imagine either First World politicians urging the North to decrease overconsumption or Third World politicians urging the South to moderate its aspirations for development. While such policies would be ultimately achievable, it is doubtful that they could be realized in the absence of a free and open debate on the advantages and disadvantages of both the capitalist development paradigm and an alternative transactional paradigm. It is still relatively easy to whip up popular support for the capitalist development paradigm by promising a world in which everyone can eventually attain the same affluent lifestyles currently enjoyed by only a minority of the world's population—despite the fact that this vision may be both illusionary and unachievable.

Many of the arguments put forth in favor of the capitalist development paradigm are more ideological than rational in nature. That is, they are not genuinely concerned with what is good for either the majority of people or the environment but rather with what is necessary to maintain existing structures of power and domination. In the ideological war, defenders of the capitalist development paradigm frequently tar their critics as being authoritarian and against human freedom, unconcerned with social justice, heartless about the plight of the poor, and inclined towards a neo-primitivism that opposes progress and wants everyone to go back to living in caves. However, it is capitalist-style development that is ultimately regressive and unattainable. A transactional model offers a vision of the future that is not only progressive in the best sense of the term, but also realistic and achievable.

BOOK REVIEWS

Environmental Words and Deeds

Daniel J. Philippon. *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers Shaped the Environmental Movement.* Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2004.

David Landis Barnhill

Both nature writing and ecocriticism are animated by a crucial tension. On the one hand, nature writers and their interpreters place great value on nonhuman nature and prize an intimacy with the earth. This has lead to what Randall Roorda has called "dramas of solitude" in retreat from human society. On the other hand, much of nature writing and ecocriticism involves a critique of human society and a yearning for a better alternative. This social aspect has intensified along with the environmental crisis, even as the literature and its criticism continues to be chastised for lacking social import.

Conserving Words is an important addition to the growing number of studies of the social and political significance of nature writing. Daniel J. Philippon argues that nature writing does indeed have social and environmental impact, because its metaphors are constructive of new ideas and valuations of nature, and they are productive of real-world effects. He focuses on five writers to make his case: Theodore Roosevelt, Mabel Osgood Wright, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abbey. Their words have been conserving, he claims, by helping to found and promote environmental organizations, respectively, the Boone and Crockett Club, the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and Earth First! Nature writing has helped form activist environmental groups, which have impacted our conceptions of nature and environmental politics.

Much of the book is a close historical analysis demonstrating the relationship between these writers and their environmental organizations, and Philippon fine-tunes analyses of their relative influence in response to the works of other historians. Of particular importance is his discussion of the lesser-known Wright and her role in the important but largely neglected part of the American relationship with nature: the suburban garden.

One of the principal values of Philippon's book is his emphasis on complexity. In the introductory chapter, he uses an apt phrase to contextualize nature writing—an "ecology of influence"—that includes social structures, political institutions, economic forces, and technology. Thus in analyzing influence, he calls for a multidirectional, multicausal perspective. With such a view it is not surprising that he sees nature writing as a broad genre

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