

# **Ecological Ethics**

## *An Introduction*

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## *Introduction*

### This Book

This book is intended to introduce the reader, clearly and critically, to the subject of ecological ethics. It is not meant to provide an in-depth analysis of any one school or thinker, nor to arrive at detailed philosophical conclusions that are irrefutable. Rather, my goal is to suggest a promising and reasonably coherent set of ethical ideas and practices, based on ecocentric values, which I believe are now urgently needed. Why so? Because to treat the natural world ethically means loving and respecting it for its own sake, not just ours; and unless more of us do so more often, not only will we suffer more but we will destroy many more others who are themselves blameless. Indeed, both things are already happening.

Let us take an initial look at ethics. Put at its simplest, ethics is the question of how one should best live and act. Even in the context of the Western philosophical tradition, that is a very old question. *Ecological* ethics, however – the view that ethical questions can no longer be restricted to how to treat other human beings, or even other animals, but must embrace the entire natural world – is a very recent phenomenon indeed. (The idea itself is not new, but taking it seriously is.) It has only come to the fore in the past 30 or so years, in exact parallel with increasing awareness of the worsening global

ecological crisis. And that crisis is the ultimate context for this book. My hope and intention is that the notion of ecological ethics will make a positive difference, however small, not only in university departments but also outside them, in the wider world. We are therefore not concerned here with scholarship for its own sake, fine and important though that is, but with scholarship for the world's sake. So I will try to concentrate on those ideas or books related to ecological ethics which have the most to offer in that respect, and I will give less attention to any others.

Of course, enough time has passed for several good textbooks on the subject to appear, as well as some excellent anthologies.<sup>1</sup> What is distinctive about this one, however, is its emphasis on ecological ethics in the fullest and deepest sense. There are three basic strands: light green or environmentalism; mid-green, mainly concerned with (other) animals; and dark or deep green, or *ecocentric*. The last, which includes but exceeds the other two, is fully ecological.

Unlike, it seems, most other authors, I take the view that there is nothing inherently difficult, obscure or problematic about this view, even if it does require leaving the usual human comfort zone. So I spend longer on the deep or dark green ethics of Deep Ecology, Gaia Theory and so on, and on related ethics such as ecofeminism, than you will probably find in otherwise similar books, for the simple but valid reason that they have been comparatively neglected, even by 'environmentalists' and 'environmental philosophers' (for reasons and in ways we shall examine). And I shall try to stay focused on the distinctive perspective of ecological and especially ecocentric ethics, not least in order not to become lost in the many other subjects we have to consider.

This book therefore does not advocate ethics by 'extension' from human beings through other animals (mostly those lucky enough to resemble people in some way that is valued) to, perhaps, and only after much agonizing, trees.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I *start* from the belief, or perception, that nature – which certainly includes humanity – is the ultimate source of all value. This 'more-than-human' nature, as Abram (1996a) aptly calls it, is not simply a set of 'resources' for us to use as we will. Not only does it have intrinsic value (something we shall discuss further below), but agency, intention, emotion: attributes which some arrogantly claim as solely human, but which result from, and are properties of, the entire web of life.<sup>3</sup> And

relationships between subjects entail ethics. (Even if you can do whatever you want with or to an object without any ethical implications, you cannot do so to another subject.) As Richard Sylvan and David Bennett put it, 'the ecological community forms the ethical community' (1994: 91).

This move resituates humans in ecological terms and nonhumans in ethical terms (Plumwood 2006b: 64). Along with the promise of a more just, stable and fulfilling life for all come some novel, even (for most people) startling, implications. One, as we shall see, is that in order to be truly ecocentric an ethic must recognize that, in certain situations, the needs or rights of the Earth or its nonhuman inhabitants must take precedence over purely or narrowly human ones.

Why do we need an ecological ethic as distinct from one based, say, on enlightened human self-interest?<sup>4</sup> One reason is that the record of the latter, which has provided the basis for all our ethical philosophies until now, is not encouraging. The current and ongoing ecocrisis clearly implies that 'environmentally at least, *all established ethics are inadequate*' (Sylvan and Bennett 1994: 26; emphasis in original). Although we shall have to qualify what is meant by 'established ethics', the broad truth of this statement stands: our ethics needs to change, because our behaviour, as influenced by ethics, needs to change.

Relatedly, the problem with self-interest is that it is, as Mary Midgley (1997: 94) says, 'by its nature rather unenlightened and hard to enlighten'. Ethics that is only concerned with humans encourages our powerful susceptibility to limited sympathies, short-termism and greed, rather than checking it. It also denies any responsibility for the effects of our behaviour on the millions of other species and many millions of living individuals with whom we share the Earth: not exactly an ethically impressive position.

### An Initial Example

Suppose a company, with official blessing, wants to cut down a forest of old-growth hardwood trees and convert them into paper products. Some environmentalists strongly oppose this, arguing that the trees are more valuable, even useful, as they are. Local people are largely

split between those whom the company employs (or lays off) and their supporters, and others for whom the most important thing is preserving the natural environment.

Is one side ethical and the other not? No: they are informed by *different* ethics, based on different values. Simply put, the values of those supporting the cut are anthropocentric (mainly or only concerned with human beings) and instrumentalist (the value of the forest is what it can be used for); the values of those opposing it are ecocentric (concerned with nonhuman nature as well as humans) and intrinsic (the forest has value in itself, regardless of its usefulness to us). We shall flesh out all these terms later.

Those in favour of logging might argue that local jobs depend on it, that the (human) public needs such products, that the old-growth trees can be replaced by purpose-grown ones which (in terms of timber) are just as good, and so on. Against this, there is an argument from enlightened self-interest that these particular trees are more 'useful' to us left alone because of their contribution to stabilizing the climate, air and soil upon which we ultimately depend. However, that point, although important and almost self-evidently true, can appear vague and abstract; more urgent considerations in 'our' interest are always close to hand. But add the arguments that old-growth forest is vastly richer (in terms of biodiversity) than a planted monoculture and can never, as such, be replaced; that it has value in and for itself regardless of its use-value to us, which can never be measured in units of square yards or dollars; that the conversion of an irreplaceable living place and home to so many others into, say, cardboard and toilet-paper would be despicable or even mad – and so on. Now we are approaching a level playing-field, at least, for such disputes.

Of course, the points just mentioned are 'value-judgements' – just as the arguments on the other side are, notwithstanding their sometimes 'rational' language. Value-judgements are unavoidable for humans. (Even if all considerations were somehow quantified and fed into a computer for an 'objective answer', the outcome would simply reflect the value placed by its supporters on quantification, something called 'objectivity', and machines.) As one of the founders of Deep Ecology said, 'The strength of the Deep Ecology movement depends upon the willingness and ability of its supporters to force fact-dependent experts who underpin environmental decisions into discussions in terms of values and priorities' (Naess 1989: 72).

When it comes to ecocentric values and ethics, Stephen Jay Gould (1993: 40) has observed that 'we cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well – for we will not fight to save what we do not love'. In other words, an emotional and even religious apprehension of nature's intrinsic value is not necessarily a problem; it is an important *part* of an ecological ethic.<sup>5</sup> (Conversely, the classical economists' image of human beings as purely rational individuals seeking to maximize their own self-interest *is* a problem.) And however paradoxical it may appear, concern for nonhuman nature greatly increases the likelihood of our own survival.

The trouble is (and herein lies many of our woes) people often don't value what is valuable. But what is valued is what ultimately determines ethics in practice. People will treat properly whoever or whatever they care about, and whatever they don't, they probably won't. So there is also an irreducible political, social and cultural dimension to ecological ethics: how to encourage enough people to behave in a sufficiently eco-ethical way, and discourage them from acting otherwise; and sooner rather than later.

People lead busy lives, dominated mostly by urgent personal concerns. Does it seem far-fetched that those lives become ones of more, if not absolute, ecological virtue? Perhaps, but as Sylvan and Bennett point out, 'Part of the task of implementing environmental ethics consists in imagining and aiming for what lies entirely beyond the bounds of present practice, thinking the unthinkable' (1994: 182). We could start by considering this: is not everything humanity has ever done, in the broadest possible sense, a development, no matter how refined, of the Earth out of which we have evolved, and of which we are still composed? More: take away the Earth and its so-called support-systems, and all life-forms, including you and me, would vanish without a trace. Is it then something of which we need take no serious heed?

Looked at in this way, an ecological ethic surely amounts to profound common sense. Indeed, the longer one spends thinking about these matters, the more today's so-called hard-nosed, single-minded and ruthless realists – corporate directors, political leaders, media moguls and other opinion-formers – appear to be the ultimate dreamers. Some of the most disastrous fantasies in human history have been espoused and pursued by 'realists'.<sup>6</sup> (As for professional

economists, it beggars belief what some will believe: that growth can continue forever in a finite world, say, not to mention Credit Default Swaps and increasing debt as a way to get rich.)

Even the kind of realism that is called 'enlightened self-interest' is not enough. For one thing, the nonhuman nature with which we share the Earth deserves as serious moral consideration as do humans. For another, unless nature gets such consideration, its richest and most wonderful places and the greater part of our fellow Earthlings are unlikely, as a direct result of our self-centredness, to survive this century – at least as great a crime as any we have committed against each other – and many, if not most of us are likely to follow.

Notwithstanding our usual intense entanglements with ourselves and those in our immediate circle, however, even we modern human beings have not entirely lost touch with an awareness of our profound involvement in, and dependence on, the natural world. Many people, perhaps a surprising number, still 'feel they live within a vast whole – nature – which is in some sense the source of all value, and whose workings are quite generally entitled to respect' (Midgley 1997: 95–6). This is a hopeful sign.

## Looking Ahead

In what follows in this chapter, I shall briefly review the nature and scale of the problem for which a good short word is *ecocide*: the wholesale destruction of life and the source of life, including ours – an Earth able to provide a livable home.<sup>7</sup> Then I shall sketch out ethics as such, two modern kinds and one ancient but recently revived. The last, known as 'virtue ethics', I shall suggest offers the most hope for developing a widespread, lasting and flexible ecological ethic. The book then turns to three kinds of specifically ecological ethics: light green (environmental), mid-green (especially animal liberation/rights/welfare), and dark or deep green (ecocentric), which last includes Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic, James Lovelock's Gaia Theory, Arne Naess's Deep Ecology, Richard Sylvan's Deep Green Theory, Left Biocentrism, and the Earth Manifesto and Earth Charter.

After that, in what is essentially the second part of the book, we shall consider various dimensions of what goes to make up eco-

centrically virtuous character (being) and behaviour (doing), both individually and collectively. That includes the contributions of ecofeminism; pluralism and pragmatism; religion and/or spirituality, with special emphasis on Christianity, Buddhism and animism; developing green citizenship, on the model of civic republicanism, together with eco-education and traditional ecological knowledge; and ecologically sustainable economies/societies, including the food system, energy and climate change. There follows a chapter on the eco-ethical problem of human-overpopulation, before I conclude with some final thoughts.

This new edition has seen much of the first one revised or augmented, but most of the new material is in the sections on religious ethics, virtue ethics, animals (including meat-eating), green ethics as post-secular, and green citizenship and eco-education, with the chapter on 'grounding an ecological ethic' (including sustainability, ecosocialism, business, the commons, climate change, wind power and green movements) entirely new.

## Value and Nature

There is a spectrum of what is valued, proceeding from the anthropocentric (human-centred), which is entirely restricted to humanity, through to the thoroughly ecocentric (Earth-centred). We shall increasingly concentrate on the latter kind as we move through the spectrum, looking at the strengths of each major position on it, but also limitations that point to the need for a more ecocentric alternative. However, ecological ethics is not intended to replace traditional human-centred ethics, which has a legitimate and important role in intra-human relationships. The point is, rather, that adding something new will enable an ethical behaviour that a more anthropocentric ethics cannot, on its own, accomplish. (I would add that once we arrive at a fully deep or dark green ethic, there will also be no attempt to judge between the several different kinds as to which is the 'most ecocentric'; here too, each has its strengths and weaknesses.)

The same reasoning explains why I have not called the subject, as it is more commonly known, 'environmental ethics'.<sup>8</sup> While there is

no point in trying to ban the term, 'environment' is widely understood in its literal meaning, namely that which surrounds. It thus denotes a passive setting which is really of secondary interest to the supposed stars. In recent years, the term has acquired a more abstract and scientific dimension, designating the biological processes and systems that sustain – again, so far as most people are concerned – us.<sup>9</sup> In either case, the term lends itself far too readily to two assumptions that contribute massively to ecological crisis: that ultimately, only 'we' matter (which, in practice, is usually restricted to only a few humans at that); and that the value, and indeed reality, of everything else only matters to the extent that it enables us to get on with our own show. It thus tends to support the ongoing collective cult of human narcissism or self-celebrity-worship, while the wide world – the only one we have – goes to hell in the proverbial handcart (or Hummer, perhaps).

To be sure, 'ecological' is not without its problems. The word was coined in 1866 by the German natural philosopher Ernst Haeckel, who borrowed the Greek word *oikos*, meaning 'home' or 'household', to describe the scientific study of the relationships among organisms and between them and their environments. In recent years, however, almost any subject or its study which emphasizes interrelationships has come to be described as ecological: the ecology of cities, family ecology, etc. In this way a whole range of meanings has now evolved, and confusion can arise if the kind of ecology intended is not made clear. But there is no reason to allow biologists proprietary rights over the word. 'Ecological' is now also commonly understood, quite legitimately, to describe a metaphysical and/or political philosophy centred on nature. And an ecological understanding of nature itself is as the extraordinarily complex and subtle web of organic and non-organic life which is entirely *relational* – so the entities related are constituted by those relations – and *reflexive*, so that it is impossible to stand outside and observe or manipulate it, either as a whole or in part, without affecting it or its other parts, or without being affected by it. Needless to say, I hope, human beings are part of nature so conceived; but they are only a part, and in many ways far from the most important.

## Ethics and Grub

It might be asked, why do we need ethics at all and thus, by implication, a book such as this? We shall look more closely at ethics in Chapter 3, but its basic questions are: What is good? And what (if anything) is the ultimate good? What is the best way to live? Or the right way to be, or at least to act? Of course, these can be troubling questions and for many people, both as individuals and collectively, in any kind of organization, it often seems easier to avoid them. This has led to the convenient assumption (for some) that ethics is at most some kind of special subject which is separate from, and therefore ultimately an optional add-on to, the rest of life. To put it crudely, as Bertold Brecht once did, 'Grub first, then ethics.' But all human societies have values and ethics; and far from being optional considerations, they are among the strongest factors that determine our actual behaviour on the ground. Brecht's statement reflects a particular kind of ethics, not an absence of any. And once having adopted such a view, grub – particularly when it is not actually an urgent issue – is often followed by a long list of other concerns which apparently also take precedence over ethics. (When these extend to personal security, comfort and glamour, a single person purchasing a four-wheel SUV for use in the city, for example, can apparently make perfect sense.)

We are also in real trouble when we allow questions of efficiency or technical 'sweetness' to shut out ethics altogether. There is massive institutionalized and career pressure to do so in most modern professions, especially the most richly rewarded. An SS doctor from the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp told his interviewer, Robert Jay Lifton: 'Ethics was not a word used in Auschwitz. Doctors and others spoke only about how to do things most efficiently, about what worked best' (1987: 91). Of course, this is an extreme example, but I don't doubt that most readers will readily recognize the sentiment from their own or others' experience. As Feyerabend (1987: 313) comments: 'Auschwitz is a manifestation of an attitude that still thrives in our midst.' (Even – especially – if it feels wrong, keep your head down, don't ask awkward questions, just do it.)

The view of ethics as optional is thus not only nonsense – as if anyone lived or acted without any idea of what is good, and

therefore right (however perverted from another ethical point of view) – but dangerous. The consequences affect us all; and when I say ‘all’, I don’t just mean human beings. With the possible exception of those living in extreme poverty where simple physical survival is an issue, there are always choices available regarding how to acquire one’s grub, to say nothing of other goods, and some will be distinctly more ethically defensible than others. To pretend otherwise simply allows the values that do guide our choices to go unexamined and undiscussed, often under a cloak of a ‘sensible consensus’.

Lately, when pressed, some committees have taken to hiring an ‘ethicist’. But ethics, properly understood, is a dimension of every human experience and enterprise; it cannot safely be left to others to take care of. As Joseph R. Des Jardins says, ‘Leaving environmental decisions to the “experts” in science and technology does not mean that these decisions will be objective and value neutral. It means only that the values and philosophical assumptions that do decide the issue will be those that these experts hold’ (2001: 7).

This point applies as much to ecology as to any other subject. The human-driven processes causing the present destruction of the natural world – unprecedented, if not in scale, in being largely the result of the activities of a single species – are not unethical in the sense that ethics is missing. On the contrary, they are saturated with a particular kind of ethics: one which is not only ecologically pathological, but largely unconscious. At that point, as someone once remarked, ‘we do not have the idea; it has us’ (quoted in Wenz 2001: 238). So ethics matters, ecological ethics in particular, and it is urgently important to raise its public profile.

A related point is that ethics is not, and never can be, like mathematics or the so-called exact sciences. It cannot provide a watertight set of rules, to be applied mechanically, that will save anyone the time and trouble of some hard thinking, and feeling, when confronted with a real, specific and unique situation that presents an ethical dilemma. As we shall see, there is not necessarily always just one right thing to do. Life is complicated and messy, and values can and do conflict. Whether personally or socially, ethics grows out of the ongoing interaction between one’s ideas and values and the world, each affecting the other; and that does not happen without you being there, so to speak.

I should point out, though, that to say so is already to take sides

in an argument within ethics. It is between, on the one hand, those who think (and feel) that ethics is essentially about selecting and applying rationally grounded principles or rules, and those who, on the other, hold that ethics grows out of lived life as a whole, not just as a portable head, and is ultimately answerable to experience rather than a theory, however fine. In ways and for reasons we shall consider, the latter approach – where ‘Ethics is closer to wisdom than to reason, closer to understanding what is good than to correctly adjudicating particular situations’ (Varela 1992: 3) – is not only itself more ecological, it is much the more hopeful direction for an ecological ethics to take.

### What’s New?

A specifically *ecological* ethic is one which values nonhuman as well as (not instead of) human nature. It recognizes that we are only a part of life on Earth; that we need the rest of it vastly more than it needs us; and that there is an ethical dimension to all our relationships with it. In other words, as I have said, a fully ecological ethic is *ecocentric* (perceiving and protecting value in all of nature), not *anthropocentric* (restricting value to humanity alone). It therefore encourages ways of living and acting which, as much as possible, allow both human and nonhuman nature – that is, more-than-human nature – to flourish.

Is an ecological ethic in this sense something new? Richard Routley first suggested in 1973 that there was now a need for ‘a new, an environmental, ethic’. (Writing later as Richard Sylvan, he has been one of the principal influences on this book.) His suggestion led to a flurry of rearguard action by philosophers on behalf of the status quo. It was led by a fellow Australian, John Passmore, who maintained that what was needed was ‘not so much a “new ethic” as a more general adherence to a perfectly familiar ethic’ (1974: 186). According to that ethic, we are responsible only to fellow human beings; thus, it could include responsibilities *for* nature, insofar as that affects us, but not *to* nature.

Passmore’s further point that ‘A new ethic will arise out of existing attitudes, or not at all’ (1974: 56) is well taken, but it doesn’t

follow that another ethic – in its composition and intention, new – is impossible. ‘New’ always means relatively new. I would add that, in this instance, there is something ancient about an ecological ethic; it is more something we have forgotten than something we have never known. Indeed, its fundamental intuition concerning the Earth and our fellow creatures therein is still present in the culture of the vast majority of indigenous people, where they have not been colonized by modern commerce (or simply exterminated). An awareness of the intimate relatedness and co-dependency of humans with plants, other animals and the places of the Earth therefore still exists, I suggest, in our collective cultural memory. Deep Ecologists Bill Devall and George Sessions are right: the change that is needed involves a ‘reawakening of something very old’ (1985: ix).

As to whether such a ‘new’ ethic is actually needed, surely the answer is ‘yes’; and now more than ever. The continuing conservatism of many philosophers begs the question: if the ethics we already have is indeed adequate, why are we in such an ongoing, and worsening, mess? Presumably they would reject one possible answer, as I would, which is that ethics as such has no significant impact on what happens in the world. That would seem to leave the strong possibility, at least, that what we have (and may have been good enough in its time) is no longer up to the job.

In any case, the current human impact on nature is driven by institutionalized ideas and values which embody a very familiar ethic, according to which the consequences of this impact simply do not matter. So a new ecological ethic, albeit one with old roots, is urgently needed. And as Sylvan and Bennett say, ‘Changing to respectful approaches to the environment and supplanting the place of humans in the world and their ethical systems may seem excessive and extreme. Yet what is now seen as unthinkable, as the voice of extremism, will in a decade or two be seen as necessity’ (1994: 184).

### Transparency and Responsibility

I make every effort to be comprehensive, fair and evenhandedly critical. However, let me point out that the author of every book, without exception, also holds certain positions; but in keeping with

certain academic conventions, they are usually relatively covert – and therefore, ironically, harder to perceive, analyse or discuss.

The same point can be understood another way. We are used to a firm distinction between description (of what 'is') and prescription (of what we should do), the latter kind of statement also being called 'normative'. But that distinction is founded more on intellectual habit than anything else. A particular description is only one way out of a theoretically unlimited number of ways the world, and any part thereof, could be described; it therefore also prescribes a particular way of looking at it. Equally, a prescriptive or normative statement also involves a particular description of the world, i.e. an assertion that it is one way and not another. It follows, then, that there is no point in pretending that it is possible to describe anything in a completely neutral or detached way. That still leaves the attempt at fairness, comprehensiveness and so on as an ideal that can, in certain situations, be healthy and helpful; but it must not be confused with the actuality, or even an ultimate ideal. We are all (intellectuals included) participating *in* the world, even when we are commenting *on* it. Observation is always a kind of intervention. To pretend otherwise simply amounts to trying to avoid acknowledging and taking responsibility for one's own perspective.<sup>10</sup>

For this reason, I have decided to be open about my own assumptions, values and priorities. Thus, this guide to ecological ethics is (openly) committed to a global ecological ethic and, by extension, to its realization in practice. That commitment means that I unapologetically concentrate on and try to bring out the ecocentric dimension – so often ignored in mainstream and even environmental discourse – of all the issues discussed here. For that reason, its treatment of properly ecological ethics is, I believe, more thorough than those of other introductory books. By the same token, I hope it will be of interest, use and maybe even inspiration not only to fellow members of the academy, whether teachers or students, but also to activists (who may be the same people).

This book is therefore not concerned with academic debates *as such*. Our primary concern here is *anthropogenic* (human-caused) ecocrisis and its possible resolution, or at least mitigation. Scholarly contributions are very important in this context, of course; but they are only aired to the extent they can contribute, through an intelligent and well-informed understanding of the relevant issues, to a

better (stronger, richer, deeper) understanding of ecocentrism, what it has to offer, and its practice in the world at large. (Understanding and practice are never radically separate anyway; 'theory' is itself just another kind of practice.) I share the goal described by van Wensveen: to find 'a middle ground between death by analysis and death by lack of critical awareness' (2000: 162).

Finally, let me be clear that I am not suggesting that ecocentric ethics is 'the answer', in the sense that it alone can win through and turn things around. Purism is not a serious option, because an ecological ethic stands no chance of being realized without many other things which are not themselves, or not necessarily, ecocentric; and since my approach is ultimately pragmatic, we shall have to address them too. On the other hand, I shall also argue strongly that no real turning can succeed without ecocentric ethics at its heart. Anthropocentric ethics alone – ethically, a form of business as usual – is simply not a serious option. And being 'progressive' or 'left' does not make it one, either. As long as human needs are our *only* concern, we shall fail both ourselves and the rest of life.