

On the Nature of Environmental Education: Anthropocentrism versus Non-Anthropocentrism: The Irrelevant Debate

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In many industrial societies, schools have frequently been called upon to solve various social problems, such as unemployment, ethnic conflicts, drug abuse, and the spread of AIDS. In face of the magnitude, ubiquity, and urgency of today's ecological problems, many educators also have been eager to incorporate ecological concerns into formal schooling. Since the 1960s, "environmental education" has been used as a generic term to refer to a set of courses/programs which address today's ecological problems in the context of formal schooling.¹ To many concerned educators, environmental education should not be another "add-on" to the formal curriculum. Instead, environmental education should be a fundamental educational reform that aims at promoting ecologically congenial cultural values.²

Environmental education, committed to social reform and school reform, poses a challenging task for educators. While environmental educators have not reached a universal agreement upon the aim, scope, contents, and methods of environmental education, "nature" has been the pivotal concept in the development of environmental education. In the late nineteenth century, proponents of Nature Study, the forerunner of environmental education argued that nature, like Latin and arithmetic, should be treated as an academic subject in the formal curriculum.³ Today, science-oriented environmental education programs continue to construct and disseminate "objective" scientific knowledge regarding the current and future prospects of nature.⁴ Alongside this scientific inquiry into nature, other educators view the recognition and appreciation of the intrinsic values of nature as the key to re-orient our ecologically exploitative cultural practices.⁵ Environmental ethicists, such as Holmes Rolston, III, make efforts to promote a recognition of the intrinsic values of non-human beings and nature as a whole. He argues:

In an environmental ethics, what humans want to value is not compassion, charity, rights, personality, justice, fairness, or even pleasure and the pursuit of happiness. Those values belong in inter-human ethics — in culture, not nature — and to look for them is to make a category mistake.⁶

However, the recognition of either the intrinsic values or the instrumental values of nature can commit us to solve ecological problems.⁷ Furthermore, the recent debates regarding anthropocentrism vs. non-anthropocentrism in the theorizing of environmental ethics actually reveals the interconnections between human ethics and environmental ethics.

In this paper, I undertake a narrative analysis of Aldo Leopold's land ethic and Arne Naess's deep ecology, which represent concerted efforts to recognize the intrinsic values of nature. I point out that the values of natural objects and processes cannot be independent from human moral reasoning, and that a recognition of the integrated relationship between the values of nature and human values can be a

double-edged sword for us in addressing today's ecological problems. In other words, understanding the cultural roots of ecological devastation could lead us to assume our responsibilities and help us to articulate ecologically congenial cultural values.

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND HUMAN ETHICS

I.B. Berkson points out that human ethics in the West is deeply rooted in the belief that the cosmos, or God, or nature supports the human ethical ideals of mainstream Western tradition.⁸ Since the Enlightenment era, the appeal to nature has led to the reconstruction of social, political, and economic institutions.⁹ As ecological crisis has become a recurring issue in the industrial age, proponents of environmental ethics, such as Leopold and Naess, have made a further effort to acknowledge the intrinsic values of nature in the theorizing of environmental ethics.

Specifically, Aldo Leopold argues that "we have a well articulated human-to-human ethic; what we need is a comparable human-to-land ethic."¹⁰ Here, Leopold refers to "land" as an ecosystem which includes soils, waters, plants, and animals. In critiquing the human exploitation of nature, Leopold considers that it is important to "change the role of Homo Sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain members and citizens of it."¹¹ Similarly, Naess promotes "deep ecology" in order to move away from what he calls anthropocentric "shallow ecology" which is only concerned with resource conservation and pollution control for the protection of humans. Naess claims that a genuine ethical concern for environmental issues must go beyond a pursuit of human interests. In his own words, "A new ethic, embracing plants and animals as well as people, is required for human societies to live in harmony with the natural world on which they depend for survival and well-being."¹² Accordingly, he proposes the principle of biospherical egalitarianism, proclaiming that all the members in the ecosphere share equal rights to live and blossom.

Furthermore, Leopold argues that "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."¹³ To him, the primary aim of human-to-land ethic is to evolve a mode of cooperation in the land-community. He states that "an ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social." In line with Leopold's land ethics, Naess also believes that "richness and diversity of life forms [including rivers and mountains] contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves."¹⁴

Leopold and Naess consider that human beings should not assume a dominant position in the land-community. Instead, they endeavor to expand the framework of traditional inter-human ethics in order to acknowledge that all members in the land-community have equal moral standing. Apparently, they believe that the principle of equality, articulated in the human-to-human ethics, should be applied to the land-community/the entire biosphere. Within such an inclusive moral community, all the living beings and non-living entities are morally considerable and human beings ought to preserve the "integrity," "diversity," "stability," and "beauty" of the land community/biosphere.

Following Leopold and Naess, some environmental philosophers argue that the recognition of the intrinsic values of all living beings and non-living entities is central for us to assert their moral considerability. More specifically, they assume that the intrinsic values of natural objects or nature as a whole are independent from human valuing consciousness. For instance, Tom Regan claims that “presence of inherent value in a natural object is independent of any awareness, interest or appreciation of it by a conscious being.”¹⁵ Furthermore, they believe that the intrinsic values of nature, informed by the science of ecology, are supposed to be “objective.”¹⁶ In Beihl’s words, “the ecology question thus raises once again the need for an objective ethics.... We must once again find an ethic somehow grounded in objectivity.”¹⁷ The underlying assumption of such a radical non-anthropocentric approach is that the intrinsic and objective values of natural objects and processes provide us with definite guidelines for ecologically responsible action.

However, J.B. Callicott argues that “there can be no value apart from an evaluator...all value is as it were in the eye of the beholder. The value that is attributed to the ecosystem, therefore, is humanly dependent or at least dependent upon some variety of morally and aesthetically sensitive consciousness.”¹⁸ In other words, human beings are an integral part of nature. Human actions, thus, should not be excluded from the constitution of the intrinsic values of nature, such as “integrity,” “diversity,” “stability,” and “beauty,” as suggested by Leopold and Naess. Above all, it is human beings who construct scientific disciplines, such as ecology, to articulate the “objective” values of nature.

Furthermore, the intrinsic values of nature, grounded in objectivity, do not necessarily lead us to reach consensus about certain moral actions. For instance, we might think that “diversity” and “stability,” as intrinsic and objective values of nature, are self-revealing and unequivocal because various living and non-living entities actually co-exist in an ecosystem; but it is human beings who need to ponder whether we want to make a deliberate effort to protect an endangered species or commit ourselves to non-intervention in face of a “natural” fire in Yellowstone Park.

In particular, there are potential and actual conflicts between the perceived intrinsic and objective values of natural objects and nature as a whole. To show moral respect for the diversity of life-forms in the biosphere, Naess suggests that it is important to decrease the human population in order to permit the flourishing of both human and non-human lives. At the same time, Naess’s theory of biospherical egalitarianism stresses the inviolable right of the individual members of the biosphere. Accordingly, the richness and diversity of life forms should not outweigh an individual organism’s right to live and blossom. Naess’s support of population control apparently contradicts his own theory of biospherical egalitarianism. Clearly, the perceived “objective” values of nature do not automatically prescribe certain legitimate moral actions. Human moral consciousness has to be involved in clarifying and resolving value conflicts.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the radical approach to disavow the involvement of human consciousness in the configuration of the “intrinsic” values of nature indeed represents a constant effort to expand the boundary of our moral

community. In what follows, I will explicate why the human-centered perspective need not impede our intention to establish a more inclusive framework of human ethics.

In his attempt to promote animal rights, Peter Singer renounces what he calls “speciesism” — “a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interest of members of one’s own species and against those members of other species.” He further argues that “to avoid speciesism,” human beings “must allow all beings which are similar in all relevant respects, such as self-awareness, capacity of suffering, to have a similar right to life — and mere membership in our own biological species cannot be the morally relevant criterion for this right.”¹⁹

Although “speciesism” reflects a narrow moral outlook that justifies our indifference to the suffering of non-human animals, human moral concerns for all the non-human animals, the living beings, and non-living entities may actually derive from species preference. Cora Diamond, in response to animal liberationists’ critiques of speciesism, argues that we should not overlook “those fundamental features of our relationship to other human beings (i.e. caring) which are involved in our not eating them.”²⁰ Likewise, Mary Midgley points out:

Questions about the morality of species preference must certainly be put in the context of the other preference which people give to those closest to them. These preferences do indeed cause problems. By limiting human charity, they can produce terrible misery. On the other hand, they are also an absolutely central element in human happiness, and it seems unlikely that we could live at all without them. They are the root from which charity grows.²¹

It follows that the renunciation of speciesism can be a forced denial of the natural bonds between the members of the same species.

The animal liberationists’ effort to eliminate the differences between humans and animals indicates an attempt to establish an environmental ethics that “requires us to go beyond ‘I’ and ‘you’ to the universal law, the universalizable judgment, the standpoint of the impartial spectator or ideal observer.”²² However, there are problems with an ethic which demands that “when we act we access the moral claims of those affected by our actions independently of our feelings for them.”²³ The origin of ethics may be what B. Williams calls a “practical necessity”:

When a deliberative conclusion embodies a consideration that has the highest deliberative priority and is also of the greatest importance (at least to the agent), it may take a special form and become the conclusion not merely that one should do a certain thing, but that one must, and that one cannot do anything else. We may call this conclusion of practical necessity.²⁴

Such a moral deliberation can be based on moral reasoning as well as moral sentiment (feelings). In fact, feeling can be the basis of moral rationality. Therefore, the exclusion of human feelings in moral decision making is an acceptance of the false dichotomy of reason and emotion.

Furthermore, animal liberationists’ proposing “sentience,” “rationality” and “consciousness” as the criteria to establish the relative intrinsic values of animals is another form of speciesism that shows prejudice and discrimination against plants and mountains. This also reflects a hierarchical structure of thinking which presumes that the human-related characteristics are morally more important than the rest of the living entities or non-living entities in nature.²⁵ Therefore, Singer himself may not have escaped speciesism.

Although the exploitative treatment of animals should be a primary concern of an environmental ethic, the point is that the moral concept of animal rights, as postulated by animal liberationists, is inadequate to address our ethical concerns regarding the full range of environmental issues. In particular, the appeal to reason has undermined and invalidated the significance of feeling in the development of environmental ethics. It should be noted that feeling reveals our intuitive understanding of our interconnectedness with the world we are living in. A rejection of human feeling entails our self-alienation. Thus, an ethical inquiry into environmental issues must consider a further exploration of the role of feeling in human morality.

In brief, environmental ethics need not be based on a human-nature binary system. Inter-human ethics can be the basis upon which we are able to establish an ever more inclusive moral community.

CONCLUSION

Today's ecological problems inevitably lead us to question the legitimacy of human domination over nature.²⁶ The recognition of the interdependence between humans and natural environment has been crucial to the development of environmental education.²⁷ Christopher D. Stone points out that our moral reasoning regarding ecological issues has grown out of how we interact with other human beings. But scarcity, technology, and bureaucratization of life have challenged the Persons Framework of traditional human ethics.²⁸ Environmental ethicists thus are inclined to promote a recognition of the intrinsic values of non-human beings and nature as a whole.²⁹

However, the recognition of either the intrinsic values or the instrumental values of nature can commit us to solve ecological problems.³⁰ Beyond such a pragmatic concern, it should be noted that non-anthropocentric moral reasoning actually derives from human-centered ethical traditions. Human morality need not be confined to inter-human affairs, and our concerns for moral inclusion or exclusion can be related to a cultivation of human moral virtue. C. D. Stone states that "throughout civilization, the more 'we' have recognized that another person, family, or tribe is like us, both in the properties 'it' possesses and the common fate we share, the readier we have been to connect our common relations with moral filament."³¹ It is true that environmental ethics is beyond the conventional scope of ethics which focuses on interpersonal relationships and specifically addresses the normative presuppositions regarding our behaviors toward nature, such as a protection of the diversity in an ecosystem. Yet, environmental ethics should not be established on a human-nature binary system. Human beings are part of nature, and nature and culture are interrelated. From this perspective, an attempt to separate environmental ethics from inter-human ethics is based on a nature-culture dichotomy, which might be one of the conceptual causes of today's ecological problems. Nature is not an abstract, static, and fixed entity, but rather, a complex and interconnected web of life. Ethical concerns regarding environmental issues should be extended to any indication of brokenness and disharmony within the web of life. Thus, an ethical inquiry into ecological issues should not be dissociated from human ethics. War, class exploitation, poverty, and animal experimentation need not be regarded as peripheral to the other ecological issues such as air/water pollution, oil spills, and the

extinction of wilderness and wildlife. This is why the environmental movement usually encompasses a variety of issues: anti-militarism, the anti-nuclear movement, the abuse and misuse of reproductive technology, and the economic exploitation of the so-called Third World.

An attempt to make a categorical distinction between the ethics of human affairs and the ethics of a human-nature relation is not apt and will prove to be a futile effort, because the framework of environmental ethics should be integrative as well as inclusive. Being cautious about our daily activities can be a strenuous effort, but such mindfulness can actually make differences.³² After all, the accumulation of millions of people's seemingly insignificant daily activities, such as driving cars or saving energy, could have an imperceptible yet causal contribution to either the worsening or mitigation of today's ecological problems.

Furthermore, I point out that our moral consciousness is inevitably involved in constituting the perceived "intrinsic" values of natural objects and process. Thus, it is important to stress human moral reflectivity in order to address the interrelated environmental issues. Above all, we need to beware that resolving value conflicts cannot be an individual endeavor; rather, we need to make a collective effort to reflexively examine the existing ethical norms and to explore the possibilities of establishing new ethical norms within our moral community.

Environmental education represents adult generations' efforts to expand the human moral community, to demand some fundamental transformation of traditional values, and to construct new values. Dale Jamieson points out that "reforming our values is part of constructing new moral, political, and legal concepts, and eventually a new world order."³³ Accordingly, it is essential to acknowledge that environmental education, as an integral part of the environmental movement, derives from a moral effort to explore and further articulate new ethical norms regarding today's ecological problems. The formation of cultural values and ethical norms is a communal process. Teachers and students must be committed to an egalitarian membership and to consensus-making in the absence of coercion in order to articulate and foster intersubjective recognition of our moral responsibilities to our ecological community. In other words, teachers and students must be seen as equal partners in a constitutive community where they can be co-inquirers in examining knowledge claims, cultural values, and ethical norms concerning today's ecological problems.

1. It is not clear who coined the term "environmental education." In the U. S., the First National Conference on Environmental Education was held in New Jersey in 1968.

2. Noel Gough, "From Epistemology to Ecolitics: Renewing a Paradigm for Curriculum," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 21, no. 3 (1989): 225-41; Larry M. Gigliotti, "Environmental Education: What Went Wrong? What Can Be Done?" *Journal of Environmental Education* 22, no. 1 (1990): 9-12.

3. Specifically, Frederick Burk proclaimed that "schooling was at fault" because the schools "taught us Latin and Greek, school mathematics, grammar...but never a word about the wondrous resources of our patrimony nor how to preserve it for you." To correct such a mistake, he suggested that "the schools and colleges should gather the knowledge of coal, water, metals, forests, power and other natural resources, and this knowledge should be given unto the youth of the land even if nothing else." See Robert Steele Funderburk, *The History of Conservation Education in the United States* (Nashville, TN: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1948).

4. S. Ham and D. Sewing, "Barrier to Environmental Education," *Journal of Environmental Education* 19, no. 2 (1987-88): 17-24.
5. C. A. Bowers, *Education, Cultural Myths, and the Ecological Crisis: Toward Deep Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Noel Gough, "Healing the Earth Within Us: Environmental Education as Cultural Criticism," *Journal of Experiential Education* 13, no. 3 (1990): 12-16; Gregory A. Smith, *Education and the Environment: Learning to Live with Limits* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Noel Gough, "Narrative and Nature: Unsustainable Fictions in Environmental Education," *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 7 (1991): 31-42. For a detailed discussion on the affirmation of the intrinsic values of natural objects and process, see Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Tom Regan, "The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic," in *All That Dwell Therein: Animal Rights and Environmental Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Janet Beihl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End, 1991).
6. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, 112.
7. Bryan Norton, *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Anthony Weston, "Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism and Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 7 (1985): 321-39; Eric Katz, "Searching for Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism and Despair in Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987): 231-41.
8. I.B. Berkson, *Ethics, Politics, and Education* (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1968), 65.
9. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 3-19
10. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 203.
11. *Ibid.*, 204.
12. Arne Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects," *Philosophical Inquiry* 8 (1986): 12.
13. *Ibid.*, 224-25. The biotic community was developed as a working model for ecology by Charles Elton in the 1920s. See Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977).
14. *Ibid.*
15. Tom Regan, *Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City: Pergrine Smith Books, 1985): 71
16. Paul B. Sears, "The Steady State: Physical Law and Moral Choice," in *The Subversive Science*, ed. Paul Shepard and Daniel McKinley (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969), 395-401; Thomas B. Colwell, Jr., "The Balance of Nature: A Ground for Human Value," *Main Currents in Modern Thought* 26 (1969): 46-52; Peter Miller, "Values as Richness: Toward a Value Theory for the Expanded Naturalism in Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 4 (1982): 101-14.
17. Janet Beihl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End, 1991), 21.
18. J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 27.
19. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Avon Books, 1975), 20.
20. Cora Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People," *Philosophy* 53 (1978): 465-79.
21. Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 103.
22. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (New York: University of Cambridge Press, 1979), 11.
23. *Ibid.*
24. B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).
25. M. Kheel, "The Liberation of Nature: A Circular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 1 (1985): 99-129.
26. Richard Routley, "Is There and a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic? in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 12-21.
27. Gary D. Harvey, "A Conceptualization of Environmental Education," in *A Report on the North*

American Regional Seminar on Environmental Education, ed. James L. Aldrich, Anne M. Blackburn, and George A. Abel (Columbus, OH: SMEAC Information Reference Center, 1977); Martha Monroe, Gary Varner, and Charles Yapple "Environmental Ethics: Strategies for Implementation" in *Building Multicultural Webs Through Environmental Education: 1988 Conference Proceedings of The North American Association for Environmental Ethics*, ed. Louis A. Iozzi and Clint L. Shepard (Troy, OH: The Northern American Association for Environmental Education, 1988), 5-9.

28. Christopher D. Stone, *Earth and Other Ethics: The Case for Moral Pluralism* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1987), 20-27.

29. Rolston, *Environmental Ethics*, 112.

30. Norton, *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*; Weston, "Beyond Intrinsic Value"; and Katz, "Searching for Intrinsic Value."

31. Stone, *Earth and Other Ethics*.

32. *Ibid.*, 326.

33. Dale Jamieson, "Ethics, Public Policy, and Global Warming," in *Applied Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Earl R. Winkler and Jerrold R. Coombs (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 324.