

## **Ecological Identification: The Sacred Relationship of Other and Self**

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Snauwert is to be commended for bringing the theme of *ecological identification* to this forum of philosophers of education. He is interested in integrating Kohlberg's morality of justice and Gilligan's morality of care; to do so, he draws upon the ethic of friendship and uses Naess's ecosophy for an understanding of the "enlarged sense of self." While I think his goal for reconciling justice and care as complementary dimensions of morality is laudable, I wish to focus here on Snauwert's argument that "ecological identification" is an extension of self that includes the earth.

I believe that it is problematic to mix paradigms. To draw upon the Kohlberg/Gilligan debate which is human-centered and then apply the arguments to clarify Naess's ecosophy is to make a leap without doing justice to the ontological framework that ecophilosophy requires. In between, Snauwert also draws upon Fromm to discuss love and its connection to friendship in order to argue that ecological identification is about the extension of friendship. We need to be cautious about such a merging of ethics and ontologies.

First, the construction of an ecosophy from a reference point that is anthropocentric is in itself a problem. For instance, in looking at the relationship of friendship and extending that relationship to include the earth, Snauwert prioritizes the self -- the human self -- in this relationship. Second, his conception of the "self" is one of an atomistic individual making choices. Although he draws from ecophilosophy to show that the self is connected to others in a "web of relations," the language and the conception that drive his explanation give priority to the human atomistic self. Given the limits of space, it will suffice to point out the following to make my case. He writes: 1) "One's self-identification expands to include a larger web of relations"; and 2) "the ethic of friendship is based upon an enlarged sense of self-identification from the personal to the ontological to the ecological. This sequence of enlarged identification constitutes the development of morality as an integration of justice and care." His concern is with the identity of the self and its expansion to others, including the earth.

Ecological identification, however, is not about this prioritizing of the self to include the earth nor is it about expansion of one's identity. I wish to argue that ecological identification is about the *derivation* of the self from the network of relationships that include the biotic. The dominant world-view guiding Snauwert's thesis is inherently different from one that acknowledges the primacy of relationships in how the self is even defined. For instance, according to Naess, there is no thing in isolation, no thing in itself. "An intrinsic relation between two things A and B is such that the relation belongs to the definitions or basic constitutions of A and B, so that without the relation, A and B are no longer the same things."<sup>1</sup> He rejects the image of the "man-in-environment" and favors the "relational, total-field image." This ontological shift, or what we might call a world-view, is a stark contrast to the one where the individual is a distanced self, impartial and objective.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in this world-view, there is sanctity and intrinsic value in the "other." For example, the ecosystem is not "out there" to which we respond as an extension of our identity; rather, the ecosystem is that which of we, as humans, are a part. Our identity is interwoven with the identity of the ecosystem. A

conception of "self" that is constituted and defined by such eco-relationships is different from the conception of "self" that is atomistic and individualistic.

What, then, does such a view of ecological identification mean for morality? Since *ecological identification* is based on a different world-view, one which takes the web of interconnectedness as a given in order to define the self, such identification also requires an understanding of the sacredness of life, broadly construed. I believe this would entail altering our value schemes from being exclusively human-centered to incorporating nature and non-human entities. We would need to ask not only can we, but how will we assimilate the moral universe beyond humanity?<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, recognizing the sanctity of life and the sacred relationship of *other* and *self* would also involve an acknowledgment of our humbleness.

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1. Arne Naess, "A Defense of the Deep Ecology Movement," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984): 265-70.

2. The roots of the Kohlberg/Gilligan debate can also be traced to this difference in perspective: Justice is derived from an ontology of the self as capable of rational and disinterested choices; it is the bounds that separate the self from others that legitimizes justice. Care is based on a contrary view; what connects us is prior to what separates us.

3. While I cannot pursue this point here, I have developed these ideas elsewhere, drawing upon Lawrence Johnson's work. See Dilafruz Williams, *A Morally Deep Education for Ecological Sustainability*, 1995, unpublished manuscript. See also Johnson, *A Morally Deep World: An Essay on Moral Significance and Environmental Ethics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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