

Ethical Approaches for Life on Earth: Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism or what ...?

By Adrian Harris.

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Plato believed that he had nothing to learn from fields and trees (Phaedrus, 230), but thankfully not all philosophers agree! This evening I'll briefly introduce the key ideas of some of the most influential environmental philosophers of recent times. Not only do they offer ethical principles that would demand radical changes in our behaviour; all of them hold that the natural world holds profound lessons for humankind. Inevitably there is much more to say about each of these approaches, so I aim to give you an outline of each.

Deep Ecology

Deep Ecology was initially outlined in a short paper (The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement) by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973. However, two Californian academics - philosopher George Sessions and sociologist Bill Devall - were influential on its subsequent development. Deep Ecology doesn't present a philosophical system, but instead presents a set of 8 principles. They are:

1. The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy *vital* needs.
4. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
5. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
6. Significant change of life conditions for the better requires change in policies. These affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality ... rather than adhering to a high standard of living.
8. Those who subscribe to the forgoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.

Arne Naess, '*Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*', Cambridge, 1989, CUP, p. 29.

These principles are deliberately broad. Naess wrote that:

"the articulation of our views is, and must be, fragmentary"
(*'The deep ecology eight points revisited'*, in Sessions (ed.), *Deep ecology for the 21st-century*. 1995: 215).

He hopes that those who adhere to the 8 principles will develop their own personal expression of them. Naess calls his own articulation of Deep Ecology 'Ecosophy T'. That name is intended to emphasize that others might develop different versions: Ecosophy A, or Ecosophy B, etc. By calling his own version Ecosophy T, Naess intended to avoid any sense that it has philosophical priority.

Naess developed two key themes in Ecosophy T: "self-realization" and "biocentric egalitarianism". I shall briefly consider each.

Naess claims that our *real* self is intrinsically defined by our place within the 'biospherical net' of relationships. In so far as I identify with a more conventional narrow ego-self, I'm deceived. We need to strive towards a state of 'self-realization' where we come to identify "with all life-forms, with the ecosystems" (Thinking Like a Mountain, 28). Naess claims that such an identification must lead us to behave ecologically because the needs of all life-forms and ecosystem are also my own needs.

Naess suggests that

'..care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves'.

(Naess, Thinking Like a Mountain, 29).

Naess's 'biocentric egalitarianism' asserts to 'the equal right' of lifeforms 'to live and blossom' (Naess, 1973, 96). Crucially, Naess add an 'in principle' clause because, he says

"any realistic praxis necessitates some killing, exploitation, and suppression" (Naess, 1973, 96).

The notion of biocentric egalitarianism is perhaps the most problematic of Deep Ecology claims, as it remains unclear in what sense all lifeforms have equal rights.

Critiques

That leads me to consider one of the primary criticisms levelled at Deep Ecology: It's frequently accused of misanthropy.

Deep Ecology principle #5 states that:

"The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease."

Critics cite a comment by Dave Foreman, an environmental activist who identified as a Deep Ecologist. In an interview Foreman offered his opinion on the famine in Ethiopia:

"The best thing would be to let nature seek its own balance, to let people there just starve" (*Simply Living interview*).

Naess disagreed with Foreman's stance, and in response said that

"We have more responsibility toward humans than we do toward animals" (Kyoto Journal).

The discussion around Foreman's comment highlights the main difficulty with deep ecology: Naess's arguably laudable attempt to allow for personal innovation within a broad movement leaves Deep Ecology open to a wide latitude of interpretation.

Most, if not all, of the criticisms levelled at Deep Ecology, have been addressed by subsequent developments. Richard Sylvan's 'Deep Green Theory' and Warwick Fox's Transpersonal Ecology are perhaps the most significant direct descendants. David Abram's animist phenomenology moves somewhat beyond the core principles of Deep Ecology, but has been especially influential.

Influence

Deep Ecology has developed into a varied and dynamic movement. Activists and thinkers holding different philosophical perspectives can agree on the basic principles, and therefore act for a common purpose. Deep Ecology was a catalyst for the formation of the radical activist organisation Earth First! & it remains influential.

Social Ecology

Up until 1987 Murry Bookchin was in the Deep Ecology camp. But at a conference that year Bookchin launch an assault on Deep Ecology that shocked the movement. His primary criticism is that Deep Ecology fails to consider social hierarchies. His alternative, Social Ecology, *begins* with the reality of exploitative power relations between people.

"The domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human" (Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 1).

Bookchin claims that social domination originated with the old seeking to dominate the young, and men dominating women. It was this model of hierarchy that led to the notion of a natural world separate from human culture. Furthermore, this quest for domination required the use of natural resources. Dominant men forced other people to use natural resources to fulfil their own selfish ends. Thus:

"the idea of dominating nature has its primary source in the domination of human by human and the structuring of the natural world into a hierarchical Chain of Being"

'What Is Social Ecology?'

We can only overcome the ideology of dominating nature by creating of a society without hierarchical structures or economic classes. Bookchin is firmly in the socialist anarchist tradition and he argues for a social structure based on affinity groups working to create decentralised ecological cities. Bookchin's alternative society claims to be based on ecological principles; an organic unity in diversity, free of hierarchy & based on mutual respect for the interrelationship of all aspects of life. Such a "communitarian society" would be able to meet human needs, respond to ecological imperatives, and develop

"a new sensibility based on sharing and cooperation".

Bookchin claims that if we change human society then our relationship with the rest of nature will inevitably be transformed.

Bookchin is the key thinker of social ecology movement, so I have concentrated on his version of its philosophy. Bookchin has carefully worked out a coherent and broad philosophy which he strongly defends. Perhaps because of this, social ecology presents a more consistent philosophical position than either deep ecology or ecofeminism.

Critiques

There are numerous critiques of Social Ecology, but I'll just mention what I see as the main difficulty, Social ecology doesn't seem to provide an entirely convincing case that there is a *necessary* causal relation between social hierarchy and environmental destruction.

Robyn Eckersley claims that many hierarchical societies "have lived in relative harmony with the non-human world" (Eckersley 1992: 151). On the flip side, it's not hard to imagine a communist society that is free of social hierarchy but dominates the non-human world through large scale technologies in order to minimize necessary labour.

Influence

Although Bookchin never attracted the kind of popular support that Naess has, his work has been widely influential, notably on the anti-capitalist movement and, most surprisingly, on the Kurdistan Workers' Party - perhaps better known as the PKK. When Bookchin died in 2006, the PKK assembly lauded him as "one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century." The assembly announced that Bookchin's "thesis on the state, power, and hierarchy will be implemented and realized through our struggle ... "

Ecofeminism

There is no single definition of ecofeminism. However, ecofeminists agree that the domination of women and the domination of nature are fundamentally connected and that environmental efforts are therefore integral with work to overcome the oppression of women.

Patriarchal dualism lies at the heart of the problem. Patriarchal dualism is a world view that orders the world by dividing it into opposed pairs of concepts: Mind is opposed to body, reason set above intuition and culture taken as superior to nature. The concept in each pair that is seen as somehow lacking or 'other' is sometimes demonized and always discriminated against. Concepts on both sides are bound into complex relationships which become mutually reinforcing.

Ecofeminists argue that oppressed groups - notably women, but also people of colour - are often associated with the body rather than the mind and may be portrayed as intuitive but overemotional.

The classic form of patriarchal dualism creates a hierarchy of value as follows:

1. God
2. Men
3. Women
4. Children
5. Animals
6. Nature

We can see how such a hierarchy would support sexism and speciesism. Ecofeminists argue that racism and imperialism are also reinforced and supported by this same hierarchy.

Patriarchal dualism valorizes qualities that are seen as masculine, like reason, and characterizes intuitive, emotional qualities as passive, weak and inferior. It can be educational to note our own feelings about these qualities. Do you see reason as superior to intuition?

Cultural feminists like Mary Daly believe that women are in essence more nurturing, co-operative and closer to nature than men. Ecofeminism has historically been somewhat split on this issue, but most now agree that while feminine values are often expressed more by women, they are not aspects of a female *essence*. Judith Plant believes that men have been alienated from the domestic world which "nurtures all who participate" (*Women and Nature*), and that they can be enriched by embracing that dimension of life.

Some ecofeminists believe that traditional 'masculine' qualities like competitiveness, leadership and intellect are valuable in appropriate contexts and when integrated with more feminine qualities can create a more balanced person.

Critiques

I now want to consider one key criticism aimed at ecofeminism.

What ecofeminists call 'patriarchal dualism' is very ancient and very widespread. It is certainly *not* restricted to the Western civilizations which cause so much environmental destruction. Significantly, most indigenous tribal societies, many of whom are held to be exemplary in their ecological awareness, hold very similar notions about masculine and feminine. Robyn Eckersley asks how ecofeminism can:

"explain the existence of patriarchy in traditional societies that have lived on harmony with the natural world?"

She concludes that:

"patriarchy and the domination of non-human nature can each be the product of quite different conceptual and historical developments".

Influence

In his 2004 study of environmental thought Peter Hay concluded that ecofeminism was the "predominate paradigm" in environmentalism. The editors of *Contemporary Perspectives on Ecofeminism*, published last year, claim that we need ecofeminism more today than ever before. Meanwhile, Indian academic Vandana Shiva, who is amongst the most influential activists in the world, continues to play a key role in the development of ecofeminism.

Conclusion

I've learnt from all three of these approaches. My own contribution to the field of environmental thinking - a paper called 'Sacred Ecology' - is critical of Deep Ecology, but I now acknowledge that it's essentially part of the broad church that Naess established.

In conclusion, I see Deep Ecology, ecofeminism and Social ecology as extremely valuable

for promoting discussion and inspiring action. I hope you think the same.

Adrian Harris (adrian@gn.apc.org).

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Utopia Where You Least Expect It, Part II

<http://ssppjournal.blogspot.co.uk/2016/01/utopia-where-you-least-expect-it-part-ii.html?view=snapshot>