
BOOK REVIEW

Patrick Curry. *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*.
Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006, 173 pp., \$26.95 paper.

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This book has two related goals, to introduce readers to the field of ecological ethics and to defend ecocentrism. The author explains that ecological ethics is closely related to environmental ethics in that both concern how humans should treat the natural world, but differs from it in conceptualizing humans as part of the web of nature, not ‘above’ nature as its stewards or masters. His thesis is that it is possible to set forth a “reasonably coherent set of ethical principles” (1) for an ecocentric ethic, which we need desperately in order to address the global ecological crisis we find ourselves in.

Following other environmental theorists, Curry places environmental theories on a continuum from *shallow green*, through *mid-green*, to *deep green*, or ecocentric. Shallow green theories are human-centered, whereas mid-green theories extend moral standing to some or all animals and plants, and deep green theories are nature-centered. Shallow green and mid-green theories start from the assumption that human beings have intrinsic value, because of their rationality, and consider whether intrinsic value can be ascribed by extension to animals and other living beings. Each of these theories posits a basis for ascribing intrinsic value, such as rationality, the capacity to suffer, self awareness, or the capacity to be “benefited or harmed in relation to its potential biological development,” (61) none of which apply to inanimate objects.

A fundamental distinction between ecocentric and other theories of environmental ethics is its ascription of intrinsic value to all natural objects, including species and places. Accordingly, humans must respect and protect nature for its own sake, not only in order to meet their own needs. For Curry and other deep green theorists, this implies that, although ecocentrism is not anti-human, humans may on occasion have to sacrifice certain of their interests to preserve the interests of non-human nature.

Curry is sympathetic to all ecocentric theories, especially Sylvan’s deep green theory and ecofeminist theory, but the one he is committed to differs in some respects from the others. For example, he holds that natural objects should not be conceptualized in material terms

alone, but have a spiritual aspect as well. Nature is sacred, and the proper human attitude toward it is reverence. No other attitude, in his view, including respect, compassion and appreciation, will move us to the action necessary to nurture and preserve it.

Another difference, especially from the land ethic and Gaia theory, is that Curry does not think it is possible to specify the basis on which natural objects are ascribed intrinsic value. It is simply a fundamental commitment of ecocentrism for him. He says, "Such value is ultimately an inexhaustible mystery. It cannot be fully explained, analyzed or justified in terms of other concepts or values" (104).

Finally, Curry sees ecocentric ethics as coexisting with other ethical systems, such as those concerned with social justice, in a pluralistic moral landscape. No one of these systems answers all of our moral questions definitively, and none is all-encompassing. He is aware that pluralism is a disappointment to those who long for moral certainty and the reassurance that all moral questions are ultimately resolvable in terms of highest principles, but holds that we must always be prepared to present and justify our ideas in the public arena, where we will convince others as much by our actions as by our words.

Neophytes in environmental theory, especially those whose inclinations do not lie in the direction of ecocentrism, will have difficulty following some of the argumentation in the book, as it is sometimes compressed and relies on references to positions of other authors. Those who have a background in environmental ethics will appreciate the book for gathering together, categorizing, and clearly presenting the main features of a large number of theories, and for its spirited defense of ecocentrism.

Readers will come away with a heightened understanding of the value of ecocentric ethics in dealing with our current ecological crisis, but with some questions as well. For example, how can Curry, who characterizes our experience of nature as pluralist, perspectival, and sensuous, identify truth with goodness, thus allowing no room in his ethical system for fear or loathing of any natural object or event? It may be true that "nature is what enables us to do anything" (139) but it also sends us flood, famine, and pestilence. Can an environmental ethic based on reverence for nature deal with the suffering we endure as a result of natural catastrophes as well as our good fortune to live in a beautiful, bountiful world?